



Islam

Restructuring Theology



Asghar Ali Engineer

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Let Knowledge Spread

Contents

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Preface	ix
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Session – I

Islam and Women Issues

1. Women's Rights in Islam	3
2. Marital Rape in Islam	6
3. Islam and Family Planning	9
4. Maulvi Mumtaz Ali: Advocate of Women's Rights	12
5. Polygamy and the Quran	15
6. Quran, Women and Hadith	18
7. Muslim Women vs Maulavis	21
8. Women and Inheritance	24
9. Purdah: What does the Quran Say?	26
10. Shari'ah and New World View	29
11. Banning Burqa Undemocratic	32
12. Muslim Women and Change	35
13. Muslim Women: Tradition and Modernity	38
14. Shari'ah, Fatwas and Women's Rights	41
15. A Fatwa that Stirred Muslims	44

Session – II
Religious Issues in Islam

16. Real Jihad – Martyrdom of Husain	49
17. Religion, Compassion and Islam	52
18. Does Riba Include Bank Interest?	55
19. Reason and Faith – Complimentary or Antagonistic?	58
20. Justice Central to Shar iah	61
21. Quran Modernity and Post-modernity	64
22. Can Gates of Ijtihad be Closed?	67
23. On Being Kafir	70
24. Love God or Fear God?	73
25. Muhammad (PBUH) As Liberator	76
26. From Jihad to Ijtihad	79
27. A Different Jihad	82
28. Martyrdom and Houris	85
29. What it Means to be Religious	88
30. Is God Dead?	92
31. Inter-religious Dialogue: Its Significance and Rules	95
32. Who is a Progressive Muslim?	98

Session – III
Islam and Different Issues

33. Quest of Truth or Power?	103
34. Post-modernism and Islam	106
35. Is Islam Capitalist or Socialist?	109
36. Two Great Modern Thinkers	112
37. Fate as Explained in the Quran	115
38. Is Music Prohibited in Islam?	118
39. Social Reforms in Islam	121
40. Rethinking Issues in Islam	124

41. The Concept of Justice in Islam	127
42. Child Marriage	130
43. Islani and Social Reforms	133
44. Islam, Democracy and Modernity	136
45. Islamic Heritage – Rational or Traditional?	139
46. Muslim Reformists' Conference at Oxford University	142
47. Islam: The State or Civilisation?	145
48. Family and Modernity	148
49. Religious Diversity and Tolerance	151
50. No Sanction for Terrorism	160
51. Training Ulema	163
52. Five Suggestions for the Islamic World	167
53. Origin of Islam: Socio-economic Perspective	/ 176
54. Why Ummah Wahidah Remains only an Emotional Slogan	185
55. Religion as I View it	194

Session – IV
Islam in India

56. Sirhindi's Children	205
-------------------------	-----

Session – V
Islamic personality

57. A Man of Knowledge and Vision	217
-----------------------------------	-----

Session – VI
Islam and politics

58. The Hope that is Obama	223
----------------------------	-----

Preface

This book is a compilation of essays, some published and most others unpublished, about Islam and various related problems faced by the community almost everyday. Most of the articles are critical of the fatwas issued by traditional clergy or the approach adopted by them, which create a lot of problems for lay Muslims, particularly Muslim women.

It is unfortunate that Islamic jurisprudence has lost the dynamism it had in earlier centuries. There were more than 100 schools of jurisprudence of which not more than seven have survived. Now Muslims follow these schools but make no effort to bring about change in view of the new problems arising in the modern world. Islam, in principle, provides for creative interpretation of the Quranic text.

This cannot be done by traditional jurists (*fujaha*). They are trained only in traditional Islamic jurisprudence and oppose any deviation from the medieval text produced by the then jurists. Whenever they are asked any question relating to juristic problems, they answer simply by referring to these medieval texts, without in any way, applying their

mind to the changes which have occurred in the society and the new problems believers are faced with.

My readers continue to ask me to write about these problems and I have tried to comply with their requests. Many of the articles included in this book were written in response to these questions. Most of my readers have welcomed my response and these articles are being compiled in the form of a book, to make these writings available to future generations.

I am thankful to Mrs Brigit Fernandes, my secretary and Mr Gopa Kumar, our typist and computer in-charge, to help me compile these articles, type them and incorporate changes. And of course, I am grateful to Renu Kaul Verma of Vitasta Publications to agree to publish these articles in the form of a book. It is hoped this book would bring about attitudinal change towards juristic problems in the Islamic world.

— Asghar Ali Engineer

12 October 2011

Session – I

Islam and Women

Women's Rights in Islam

The question of women's rights in Islam has become more pertinent in our time because literacy and higher education have significantly increased among women, as have urbanisation and the pressures exerted by it.

Women are no longer prepared to accept their position as 'the second sex', as the French feminist Simone de Beauvoir put it in the last century. Women today are very conscious of their rights and they rightfully demand gender parity in all fields.

Muslim women are far behind their counterparts in other world communities; they are more subjugated to men's will than women in other faith-traditions. Muslim women arguably suffer more because of Sharia rules whose interpretation is projected as 'divine' and 'immutable', which it is not. This illusion persists among Muslims (men and women) perhaps only because Sharia is based on the *Quran* and *Hadith*.

What few people realise is that Sharia, though based on the *Quran* and *hadith*, is in fact based on the interpretation of the *Quran* (and *hadith*), and interpretation is human while the Quranic text is divine. This human interpretation of the divine text has all along been done by men and hardly by any women. Even when some women attempted it,

the overwhelming authority has been that of men. I meet many women educated in women's madressahs today, who fully justify all such interpreted Sharia rules and accept their secondary position in society.

This situation can be balanced perhaps if more women scholars interpreted the *Quran*. The *Quran* indeed gives equal rights to women unambiguously (2:228). Thus, when women interpret the *Quran* from their perspective, they would benefit from the rights given to them by the Holy Book. In some cases problems also arise because Quranic verses have been interpreted in the light of certain ahadith; ahadith also need to be critically examined.

The science of hadith was developed by the muhaddessin (those who specialise in the science of hadith), which entirely depends on the narrator. The authenticity of a hadith depends on the character of narrator, not on his/her intellectual capacity or ideological position towards women. Also, in some cases even if a hadith apparently contradicts a Quranic formulation it may be accepted as long as it fulfils other criteria. Thus, it will be seen that *riwayat* (narration of text) is held as more important than *dirayat* (i.e., intellectual criteria) by traditional theologians.

This is precisely why the *Quran* was perhaps so interpreted in a male-dominated and feudal society to subject women to men's overriding authority. The Quranic positions and unambiguous formulations for equality of men and women were considerably diluted in such formulations. One of the key values of the *Quran*, namely, *adl* (justice), became secondary when it came to women's rights.

Quranic verses on polygamy or *nushuz* (rebellion by women, 4:34) were so interpreted, especially with the help of ahadith, that their real meaning and intent were lost and social ethos prevailed over divine intent. Even the verses on *talaq* (divorce) were interpreted by some to justify triple divorce in one sitting. Thus, the verses on polygamy and divorce were so interpreted to subject women to men's overriding authority.

There is a great need for women theologians in Islam who can read and interpret the *Quran*. Some men like Maulavi Mumtaz Ali Khan, who was one of the colleagues of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, did excellent work in the 19th century to advocate gender equality, based on his

interpretation of Islam. His book *Huququn Niswan* is an excellent work published in early 1890s. Another such theologian in the 20th century was Maulana Umar Ahmad Usmani, who was a graduate from Dar-ul-Uloom (before he migrated to Pakistan), and a great advocate of gender equality. He named his book – quite significantly – *Fiqh al-Quran* because his understanding of the *Quran* is not based on hadith literature; he depends for his formulations only on the *Quran*.

Recently some women scholars were making efforts to understand the *Quran* from their own perspective. Fatima Mernissi of Morocco and Amina Wudud and others have done excellent work interpreting the *Quran* from independent scholarly perspectives. Also, from the US, one scholar, Laleh Bakhtiar, has translated the *Quran* into English from a feminist perspective. She calls it 'inclusive' as against others' 'exclusive' translations. But all this is not sufficient though quite important. More and more women theologians should come forward and interpret the *Quran*. It is not easy to challenge the corpus of literature on the *Quran* for the last 1,300-1,400 years. This is necessary to restore to women the rights they lost to men under a feudal social ethos.



Marital Rape in Islam

A controversy has surfaced after President of Afghanistan Hamid Karzai signed a bill, which proposes that a woman can be forced for physical intimacy by her husband against her will. After Karzai signed the bill there was hue and cry not only from women's organizations but also from western governments, and he reportedly agreed to withdraw the bill.

This, however, raises the question whether Islam allows what is now called 'marital rape'? Islamic jurists in all probability will say yes. After paying the *mehr* amount, according to Islamic jurists, the husband acquires a right over her and she cannot refuse the 'right' of her husband to come near her.

However, if we look at the Quranic pronouncements, it is not so. *Mehr* is certainly necessary part of Islamic marriage and without paying *mehr* husband cannot go near her. But it is not true that as soon as she pays, it becomes his unconditional right to have physical intimacy with her. *Nikah* and *mehr* do not make him 'owner' of her body. No one owns her body except herself.

Let us look at some of the Quranic pronouncements in this respect. It is well known that marriage is a contract in Islam what the *Quran* calls *mithaan ghaliza* (strong covenant) (4:21). However, any contract is

subject to certain conditions especially when it comes to marital contract between two human beings. That is why the *Quran*, while describing marriage a covenant, goes much beyond it and treats this relationship between two human beings as tender and sensitive.

The *Quran* describes husband and wife as *libas* (apparel, garment) for each other (2:187) thereby implying that marriage or sexual desire is much more than a natural instinct like hunger or thirst. It has higher end and marital contract is means of protection for each other, comfort and embellishment for each other. Thus, describing husband and wife as each other's *libas*, the *Quran* has beautifully described this relationship.

Also, the *Quran* describes this relationship as *mawaddah* and *rahmah* (30:21) i.e. love and compassion and also seeking solace in each other (*li taskunu*). This is very sensitive description of marital relationship. Force and compulsion has no place in it. It will destroy this relationship. *Mawaddah* and *rahmah* are the very basis of this relationship. Marriage cannot persist without love and sacrifice for each other. It is not piece of land that one can acquire right over it after paying for it.

The *Quran* nowhere says that a husband acquires right over his wife's body after he pays *mehr* to her. It is very crude conception of marriage. The *Quran* is so sensitive to her rights that it allows her even to refuse to suckle her child, if she so decides. Just consider this important verse (65:6) "Lodge them where you live according to your means and injure them not to straiten them. And if they are pregnant, spend on them until they lay down their burden. Then if they suckle for you, give them their recompense, and consult one another in a fair manner and if you both disagree (that mother should suckle the child), let another woman suckle (the child)."

This verse makes it clear that man cannot even force her (his wife) to suckle his child and if she does, he has to pay her. Thus, a woman alone has right over her body, not her husband. Unfortunately, traditional Islamic jurisprudence has ignored many pronouncements of *Quran* in order to read the *Quran* under the influence of patriarchal values.

It is the duty of the present generation of Muslims to re-read

and re-interpret the *Quran*, in the light of new awareness of woman's sensibilities and to construct a new jurisprudence, in the light of the *Quran* to give woman her due. Traditional jurisprudence has been deeply influenced by the medieval patriarchal values and women lost many of her rights which the *Quran* had given her.

If we go by the *Quran*, man cannot force his wife to fulfill his sexual lust. It can be a tribal but certainly not a Quranic concept. The *Quran* is sensitive to her individuality and her rights. Thus, forced sex in marriage does constitute what modern jurisprudence calls 'marital rape' and should be prohibited.



Islam and Family Planning

This is a highly controversial issue among Muslims. Some maintain that Islam has no place for family planning and others, on the other hand, say it is not at all against the tenets of Islam. Generally, the mullahs sternly oppose it and maintain that our Prophet (PBUH) has asked us to increase the number of *ummah*. Muslims should, therefore, multiply their number.

They also quote a verse from the *Quran*, "And kill not your children for fear of poverty—We provide for them and for you. Surely, the killing of them is a great wrong." (17:31). Here, in this verse what is being said is not related to family planning. It speaks of children born and not children that have not even been conceived. No one would ever advocate killing children already born or even conceived and in advanced stage of pregnancy, which would certainly amount to killing.

According to Imam Raghib in *Mufradat* (which is dictionary of the *Quran*), here 'killing of children' means *not giving them proper education* as ignorance is intellectual death and intellectual death is worse than physical death, in a sense. If what Imam Raghib says is taken as the real meaning of the above verse, it strengthens position of those who advocate family planning. More children means parents will not be able to properly educate them.

Not only that but parents will not even be able to feed them and give them nourishing food necessary for good health and healthy upbringing. This will be possible if number of children is less. Interestingly, this was the position of Imam Shafi'I, who explaining the verse 4:3, which is mainly on polygamy are *dhalika adna alla ta'ulu* which is normally rendered as, "This is more proper so that you may not do injustice," but Imam Shafi'I translates it, "so that you may not increase your progeny (Arabic 'ayal).

Imam Shafi'I says the meaning of the verse would be if you fear you cannot do justice better marry one or prisoners of war so that you do not have many children. If Imam Shafi'I's translation is accepted then *Quran* itself advocates having few children or spacing children in such a way that you may not feel burdened and may educate and nourish them properly.

Some other commentators maintain that this verse i.e. 17:31, relates to the tradition of Arabs killing their daughters and used to give argument that we are poor and cannot provide for them. Therefore, Allah says, we provide for them and for you. In any case there is no question of killing children already born. The family planning is certainly not about killing children already born but spacing children and restricting their number to one's affordable income.

Imam Ghazali also quotes a number of traditions from the Prophet (PBUH) to show that prevention of unwanted birth is permissible, especially if mother's health is in danger. According to the Imam, both husband and wife can prevent birth of a child with mutual consent. Ghazali goes even one step further and says conception can be prevented even if mother's beauty is likely to be affected.

He even shows various ways of aborting a child up to third month of pregnancy if mother's health is in danger and shows ways of abortion. Jurists maintain that abortion on grounds of mother's life is permissible according to the *Quran*, Allah infuses life in the 4th stage of conception. Hazrat Ali is also reported to have approved of the abortion up to the third month in case mother's life is at danger.

Also, the Prophet had permitted '*azl* (coitus interrupts) if one goes

with one's wife on a long journey and does not want his wife to bear child during journey. Some scholars argue that '*azl* should be taken in much wider meaning and can justify today use of contraceptive as '*azl* was the only known contraceptive in those days.

Also, family planning was not a necessity in those days and this question did not arise the way it has today. Earlier, the question arose only on grounds of mother's life or health. One can also use the doctrine of *zarrorah* (necessity) which makes even *haram* as *halal* if there is a pressing necessity.

In any case it would not be correct to denounce family planning as a sin as it basically involves prevention of unwanted pregnancy, nothing more and nothing less.



Maulvi Mumtaz Ali: Advocate of Women's Rights

It is generally believed that the movement for women's rights began with western educated people in the 19th century. But very few people know about Maulvi Mumtaz Ali Khan, a traditional 'alim, product of Dar-ul-uloom Deoband, who very enthusiastically supported gender equality. There are two things to be noted here: one, he was a traditional 'alim and was not under the influence of the western thought and, two, he was advocating gender equality purely on the basis of Islamic traditional sources i.e. the *Quran* and hadith.

The Maulvi was enthusiastic supporter of women's rights and was one of the colleagues of Sir Syed. Sir Syed had a lot of trouble on his hand due to his campaign for a modern educational institution for north Indian Muslims. He was facing stiff resistance from orthodox 'ulama and did not want more trouble, he advised Mumtaz Ali Khan not to publish his book *Huququn Niswan*, the manuscript of which he had shown to Syed. However, the Maulvi was determined to educate Muslim men and women and went ahead with its publication.

Huququn Niswan, I dare say without any exaggeration, is like a charter of rights for Muslim women. Mumtaz Ali Khan proves through his interpretations of relevant Quranic verses that men and women

have equal rights. This book, however, soon went into oblivion and was not available.

I obtained its copy from a US library and published it. It must be read by all Muslim women to get duly armed with Quranic arguments to fight for their case. Maulavi sahib had married an uneducated woman. He not only educated her but also made her editor of a women's magazine, which had become quite popular in those days. This magazine, besides educating women about their rights also made them aware of contemporary events, especially socio-cultural.

Maulavi sahib's arguments were quite ingenious based on his interpretation of Quranic verses. He called men's so-called superiority as *mardon ki jhuti fazilat* (false superiority of men). For example, men argue that if women are equal to men why Allah did not grace any woman with prophethood (*nubuwwat*)?

Mumtaz Ali Khan gives quite an ingenious reply to this argument. According to him, there have been one lakh and twenty four thousand prophets and we know names of only about a dozen prophets. How can then we say there have been no women prophets. Similarly, his reply to the argument that why women are half the witness if they are equal to men is as follows:

The *Quran* does not say that women are half the witness but only recommends that in financial transactions have two women and one man if two men are not available. This, according to Mumtaz Ali, is a privilege for women rather than a stigma. Two women have been suggested because often women are not available because of some or the other problem such as menstruation or pregnancy. Such privilege is not available to men.

He also rejects the argument that Allah first created Adam and then Eve and that Adam is superior to Eve. Mumtaz Ali Khan believes that these stories are taken by commentators of the *Quran* from Christian and Jewish sources. The *Quran* does not say who was created first and who later.

Similarly, the argument about permissibility of four marriages simultaneously is also, as he says, there is no clarity in the verse (4:3)

whether it allowed four wives simultaneously, or one after the other or divorcing one and marrying second and so on.

In any case, it is the most interesting book with alternate interpretation of Quranic verses as far as women's rights are concerned. One can say it is the first feminist interpretation of the *Quran* in the Indian subcontinent as early as 19th century.



Polygamy and the Quran

In our attempt to codify Islamic law in India, which is today quite loosely applied, causing a lot of problem to Muslim women, we interviewed a number of prominent ulemas. One of our questions was whether polygamy should be regulated. With a few exceptions most of them said 'no'. Polygamy is needed and some even said it was an exclusive preserve of man and he could have a second wife even without any reason or permission of the first.

They also maintained that polygamy was needed to prevent prostitution in the society. 'To check sexual corruption, polygamy is a must!' This raises a fundamental question: Does the *Quran* prescribe polygamy to check sexual corruption or prostitution? There are two verses in the *Quran* on this subject – 4:3 and 4:129. In both these verses there is not even indirect hint of any kind of sexual corruption.

The first verse 4:3 was revealed, we are told by earliest commentators of the *Quran*, after the battle of Uhud, in which a large number of Muslim men were killed. This led to creation of many widows and orphans which were to be taken care of. Many of these widows had their own land and property left behind by their husbands.

Who would look after the widows and their properties? Some rela-

tives or guardians. So the *Quran* advised these guardians to be honest and not to change their bad property (*khabis*) with the good (*tayyib*) properties of the orphans. And if one goes by the words of the *Quran*, it advises these guardians to marry one or two or three or four of these widows (not any women) children of whom they are in charge of.

And this verse ends by saying, "If you fear you cannot do justice, then marry one (*wahidatan*). Thus, we see two things clearly: one, the *Quran* has clearly stated the reason for permitting multiple marriages and two, it is conditional that justice be done. This conditionality becomes clearer in verse 4:129 where it is said, "And you cannot do justice between wives, even though you wish (it), but be not disinclined (from one) with total disinclination, so that you leave her in suspense...."

If both verses on polygamy 4:3 and 4: 129 are read together (and they should be read together), the *Quran*'s intention becomes clear. The *Quran*'s emphasis is not on number but on justice. In our male dominated societies, emphasis unfortunately is on number, not on justice. Both verses read together make it absolutely clear that the *Quran* has permitted polygamy most reluctantly in certain conditions like that of war and has made it conditional on justice.

Our ulema and jurists unfortunately have ignored both the conditions (that of war and of justice) and give reasons for polygamy, not stated in the *Quran* at all. Sexual corruption is nowhere stated in the *Quran* for justifying polygamy as our ulema are doing today. Many of them are not even aware of verse 4:129 which says it is so difficult to do justice between all the wives or if they are aware explain it away in some ways belittling its emphasis on justice.

Some of the ulema even denied that this verse was revealed after the battle of Uhud and also argue that the verse 4:3 does not require that one should marry widows or orphans only citing a hadith from Muslim, which says Hadrat Aisha understood by that 'any women', not widows and orphans. If the *Quran* had meant any women it would require insertion of certain words which are not there.

And even if this report of Sahih Muslim be correct, how can one ignore the conditionality of justice which is stated so clearly and with

so much emphasis? One Muslim scientist wrote to me that the *Quran* prescribes polygamy because man is polygamous by nature. He, in his letter, argued elaborately but without substantiating his argument with any scientific evidence.

The *Quran*, on the other hand, clearly says that we have created everything in pairs (*wa khalaqnakum azwajan*) and it includes human beings too. Also, the *Quran* lays emphasis on chastity (*'iffat*) and says, "And let those who cannot find a match keep chaste, until Allah makes them free from want..." (24:33). Thus, the *Quran* says if you have no means to marry one wife be chaste and our ulema want men to marry more than one to refrain from sexual corruption. Who should we listen to? To Allah or these ulema? We can draw our own conclusion.



Quran, Women and Hadith

The *Quran* indeed has ushered in a revolution as regards the women's rights. Never did women enjoy any rights either in marriage, divorce or inheritance. She was thought to be totally dependent on father, husband or brother and had no individual existence. Even philosophers like Aristotle thought women and animals had no soul. The *Quran* gave her distinct legal personality for the first time.

This revolutionary approach to women's distinct individuality was hardly acceptable to the Arab society. Arabs were, by and large, a patriarchal society and wanted to keep women under their thumb. But after Islam became a national religion for Arabs they could not easily deny what the *Quran* gave to women. Thus, they found a via media of hadith, and thousands of ahadith came into existence taking away from women what the *Quran* had given them.

Thus, women by the time Umayyads assumed political power, again lost their equality and after Islam spread to Iran and parts of Roman empires, influences of feudal culture overpowered thinking of Islamic jurists that further eroded women's status. Now she was again confined to home and it became her duty to obey her husband and not go out of home without his permission. According to one hadith, the

Prophet (PBUH) said that if *sajda* were permissible to man I would have ordered her to perform *sahda* before her husband. Such ahadith are thrown on her face to make her subjugated to her husband.

On the basis of some ahadith of doubtful origin, she was denied the right to enter a mosque. She was given untrammelled right by the *Quran* to enter into marriage contract herself and without her consent no marriage could be valid. But the jurists opined that even her silence amounted to her consent and even if she cries it should be taken as her consent because she is crying as she would be separated from her parents.

We see that the conservative patriarchal society had its deep imprint on the minds of Islamic jurists and what is more unfortunate is that ulema subsequently developed the doctrine of *taglid* (blind imitation) and almost forbade *ijtihad* or fresh thinking about what was formulated more than 1200 years ago. Not only this, the ulema also did not allow women to follow provisions of another school, if it benefited them.

Thus, women following Hanafi school could not benefit from any provision in Maliki school, if it were more beneficial to them. These four schools in Sunni Islam i.e. Hanafi, Shafi'I, Maliki and Hanbali were product of human thinking and human interpretation of Quranic pronouncements and hence by no stretch of imagination could be 'divine' or immutable but these schools acquired almost divine status and common Muslims thought the laws framed by these respective jurists are immutable.

I am not saying here that we should completely reject entire corpus of ahadith but what I am proposing is that we must rigorously screen all ahadith, including those from *Sihah Sitta* i.e. the six authentic collections and reject those which directly contradict Quranic pronouncements. In other words, the *Quran* must have precedence over hadith and we will have to develop new science of *usul-al-fiqh* i.e. principles of jurisprudence.

According to this, first we will have to fix what are basic principles culled from the *Quran* which must be applied for framing any law pertaining to marriage, divorce, inheritance, custody of children etc. For example doctrine of justice '*adl*' is very fundamental to the *Quran*. No

law framed which contradicts this doctrine can be admissible. The *Quran* itself has applied this doctrine say in case of polygamy very rigorously and declares if you fear you cannot do justice, then marry one!

Unfortunately, our jurists almost, if not completely, ignored it and number four (wives) became more fundamental than justice. And they also ignored that this verse (4:3) was revealed to do justice to widows and orphans and to protect their properties. It did not apply to marrying any women but only widows and orphans to ensure protection of their properties.

Our jurists even incorporated many pre-Islamic customary practices ('aadat) and they too became part of Islamic law. Thus, triple divorce in one sitting which was strictly banned by the Prophet (PBUH) also became part of Shari'ah and today thousands of women in India are victims of this arbitrary law. And the Quranic right of *khul'a* and according to one authentic hadith, Prophet (PBUH) made it her absolute right, was subjected to husband's prior consent and now husbands use this 'right' to consent to persecute their wives.

Many more examples could be given but for now these are enough to demonstrate and to urge that there is great need to restore Quranic rights to our women and to re-claim individuality and dignity accorded to women by the *Quran*.



Muslim Women vs Maulavis

I read two different reports a few years ago, one in a leading English daily and the other in an Urdu daily from north India. The English daily carried its reporters' interviews with young madrasa girls from Kerala though the madrasa authorities have strictly banned Press from talking to the girls there. It is interesting to note that these madrasa girls have aspirations of their own.

One madrasa girl, about 15 years old, said, 'I want to become a pilot,' the other of the same age said, 'I wish to become a doctor and the third girl said I want to become an IAS officer. Most other girls also showed similar aspirations to achieve something and be something in life.

The other report in Urdu daily reported a speech by Maulana Shamsuddin Chaturvedi of a Barelvi School who while tying *dastar-e-fazilat* (turban of merit) on students who had completed memorizing the *Quran*, that Islam is a complete code of life and that we must observe its teachings meticulously in our lives and not allow our women outside home and make them observe veil.

"Aurten ghar ki zeenat hain" (women are the pride of our homes) and they should not venture out of homes. It has brought about decline

of Muslims. Unlike our ancestors, we do not observe teachings of Islam. We dis-honour our families by allowing women to become lax in their morals. The sum and substance of his exhortation was that Muslims should exercise strict control over their women.

What does this contrast show? What Muslim women want and what our ulema desire. It clearly shows that our ulama live in the world of their own. And what is ironical is that the ulema do not even live in the ideal world of Islam. They live in the world of Islam created by medieval mindset. This is precisely the world in which the Taliban also live and that is why they persecute, harass and even kill those women who want to achieve something in this world.

Just before I read these reports I was surrounded by some Hindu women who worked among Muslim women for their uplift in Bihar and asked me why Islam puts so many restrictions on women and why Muslims can divorce their wives by pronouncing the word *talq* thrice? I began to explain to these women that it is not teaching of the *Quran* but some Muslims use controversial *ahadith* to allow triple divorce or put restrictions on women.

Two, Urdu journalists who had come to interview me were also sitting by my side. When I used the word 'controversial *ahadith*', they became angry and began arguing with me whose Islam are you talking about? It is your Islam, not real Islam. These Urdu journalists apparently were 'educated' and yet had similar attitude as our ulema have.

Our institute is conducting these days interviews of noted ulema in order to codify *Shari'ah* pertaining to marriage, divorce, inheritance etc. as they are applied today very loosely in India. When they are asked about codifying rules for regulating polygamy, most of them maintain it cannot be regulated as men have 'right' to marry up to four wives without even consulting first wife, or wives, if there are more than one.

This is necessary, they maintain, to check prostitution. The *Quran*, does not even indirectly justify polygamy on such grounds. When we point out the verse on polygamy was revealed after battle of Uhud in which 10 per cent of Muslim male were killed and it was meant for

taking care of widows and orphans, not to check prostitution, they say it is your own invention.

Some of them showed ignorance of the verse :129 which says you cannot do justice to more than one wife, even if you desire and do not leave first wife suspended (*mu'allaqatan*) and said man has unrestricted right to marry four wives. No doubt it is these traditional ulema for whom tradition, hadith-based Islam is more important than Quranic Islam which accords equal status to women.

There is thus urgent need to re-educate our ulema in real Islam so that Muslim women can breathe easy and be able to realize their rights on which we spend so much of our oratorical skills but then go on to deny them these rights in practice. Thus one of the real jihads, among others, is to struggle for women's rights so concretely and precisely spelled out by the *Quran*.

Islam no more can be practiced the way it was practiced during the medieval ages. Modern Islam either has to be in conformity with the *Quran*, the revealed scripture of Allah, or we will face serious problems and end up producing Taliban like Islam.



Women and Inheritance

I am often asked both by Muslims and non-Muslims as to why a daughter gets half that of son from her father's inheritance? Is it not injustice? It is said men and women have equal rights in Islam, but if a woman gets half that of her brother in inheritance, how can we say man and woman are equal in the said religion?

Well, traditionally, there was no share in inheritance for daughters. Islam created it. Women were not earning and contributing to the family wealth. She would go to her husband's place and get share in her husband's property. In addition, she would get *mehr* at the time of marriage and also a promise for maintenance. Given all this, it may not amount to injustice if she gets only half the share in her father's property.

In the encyclopedic work *Ikhwanus Safa*, there is debate on this issue. The Master tells his disciples that Islam gives to weaker sections double of what is intended for others. The disciples ask are women among weaker sections? The Master said yes. The disciples ask why women are given only half of what brothers get in father's property? Master says you have not understood the Quranic logic of giving half to daughters. In fact, the *Quran* has given twice that of sons.

Bewildered, disciples asked how half can be twice? The Master ex-

plains: If father leaves behind 1000 dirhams, son will get 55 and daughter will get 250. When son will marry, will give away 250 dirham by way of *mehr* and will be left with only 250 dirham. And when daughter marries she will get 250 by way of *mehr* and will have $250 + 250$ i.e. 500 dirham with her whereas her brother has been left with only 250 dirham after giving *mehr*. Thus, who got twice? Son or daughter? Obviously daughter.

But this explanation assumes certain things which may not be true in today's life. First, women may not always get substantial *mehr*. At times she gets just nominal *mehr*. Second, these days the middle class women work and contribute to the family wealth so she is entitled to larger share. Third, in many cases women may not get married and not only would they not get *mehr*, they will also have to maintain themselves after their parents death. Thus, the *Ikhwanus Safa* explanation today is redundant. But the *Quran* certainly is not insensitive and leaves space for justice.

The Quranic verses on inheritance end with proviso that after paying "a bequest you may have bequeathed or a debt" (4:11-12) The *Quran* has repeated this twice. Thus, we see four times the *Quran* lays stress on bequest or debt, if any on the part of deceased and then remaining will go to the inheritors as laid down by the *Quran*. Thus, the person who leaves behind his property has every right to make will in favour of anyone he likes.

The Jurists have argued that these verses were annulled after the verses on inheritance were revealed. One finds an interesting discussion on this in Maulana Umar Ahmad Usmani's book *Giqh-al-Quran* 7th Volume (Karachi, 1986). Thus, the Quranic injunction for will stands and father has every right to will extra in favour of his daughter who cannot or does not want to marry or is physically challenged or maybe is contributing to the family income.

The *Quran* created share for her where it did not exist among Arabs in pre-Islamic period and the *Quran* gave them equal rights in all spheres so it will be in keeping with the cannons of justice if more is given to them, especially by way of will (*wasiyyah*) by her father to safeguard her future.



Purdah: What does the Quran Say?

A couple of years ago, I read in a newspaper from Lucknow that a Muslim lady, about 50 years old, and chief of a Muslim women's welfare organization, declared her candidature for forthcoming parliamentary election from Lucknow. She wanted to contest so that she could project women's problems in Parliament. It was also reported that as soon as she declared her candidature, she began to receive phone calls from some maulavis that women were supposed to be '*purdah nashin*' (one who wears veil and sits at home) and were not supposed to contest election. However, she did not pay heed and fought election.

In another incident, a Muslim woman candidate, under 33 per cent reservation, filed her nomination for municipal election from Deoband, which is seat of famous Islamic seminary *Dar-ul-'Uloom*. A *fatwa* was issued barring women from contesting elections.

Now the question arises, is observing purdah obligatory in the *Quran*? Or is it a social custom, which is strictly observed in certain families. I also read many articles in Urdu press that glorify *purdah* in the name of Islam. These maintain that the *purdah* is no obstruction in normal day-to-day work but enhances women's capacity to work.

Unfortunately, most of us tend to accept anything in the name of Islam and begin to praise or justify it.

It is also to be noted that there are different types of *purdah* observed in different Islamic countries or communities. Women wear the *abaya* in Saudi Arabia which covers woman's entire body from head to foot. In Iran, women are required to wear *chador*, which generally covers the head. In Indian subcontinent, while some women wear an overall black colour that covers the entire face with two eyes popping out, others wear overall but do not cover the face.

Thus, the kind of *purdah* we observe differs from country to country and from one community to another. What is Quranic position? In Arabic, veil is called *hijab* which means to cover, to hide or to stand in between. The *Quran* does not use the word *hijab* for women in general. Instead, it exhorts women not to display their *zeenah* (adornments, charms) publicly (see 24:31).

This was to check rich and neo-rich women displaying their most charming dresses and embellishments publicly. However, they were permitted to do so before all those men and women who were their close relations whom they were not permitted to marry. The *Quran* nowhere requires women to cover their faces or much less, sit at home. In fact, the verse 31 of Chapter 24 begins by exhorting both men and women to lower their gaze when they meet each other. If women were required to wear veil, covering their face, where was the question of lowering their gaze?

The word *hijab* has been used in the *Quran* only for wives of the Prophet (PBUH) that too the verse (33:53) exhorts men not to enter Prophet's (PBUH) house except when invited and not to linger on talking to his wives. This was because some men had the tendency to linger on after dining and indulge in talks with Prophet's (PBUH) wives.

What we make our women to observe in the name of *hijab* or call them *purdahnashin* is social custom from feudal ages when all sorts of restrictions were imposed on women and it was thought that the rightful position of women was at home, to serve their husbands and children. Even most orthodox Ulema agree that the verse 24:31 does not imply

that women cover their faces. In fact, there is consensus (*ijma*) that women should cover their heads and other parts of body except face and two hands.

Since the crucial word in this verse is *zeenah*, not *hijab*, Ulama agree that women cannot only keep their face open but also can apply collyrium to their eyes and can wear rings in their fingers. The *Quran*, has put no restrictions on women as we find in our societies. They are free to move out, exercise their rights and even earn their living. One does not find this culture of *purdahnashin* anywhere in the *Quran*. Women are supposed to be active agents like men. They even took part in battles during Prophet's (PBUH) time. In fact, it was a woman who saved Prophet's life in battle of Uhud by taking sword's blow on herself. They also took part in public debates and Hazrat Umar even appointed a woman as market inspector.

Let us thus follow the *Quran* and not social customs and tradition which reflect social values more than Quranic injunctions. Let us not paralyse half our population in the name of Islam. If women too become active agents our society will become much more dynamic and healthier.



Shari'ah and New World View

The Swat Valley pact with Pakistani Taliban and enforcement of Shari'ah was in news. The Pakistani Government had agreed to allow the Swat authorities to enforce Shari'ah in Swat Valley and nearby Malakand. Everyone knows how the Shari'ah is understood by the Taliban. Earlier, they had burnt more than 400 girls schools saying it is not permissible for girls to go to school. Later, they agreed to restart schools provided girls wore *hijab*.

Which Shari'ah position is correct according to them? If the girls could have gone to schools with *hijab* why did then they burn the schools down earlier? Has their Shari'ah changed? It is anyway quite strange that someone could try stop girls from getting education in the name of Shari'ah. Islam is the first religion which made it obligatory for men and women both to acquire education.

According to a well-known hadith, acquiring *ilm* (knowledge) is obligatory (*faridat*) on all men and women. Also, the *Quran* uses the word *ilm* and its derivatives hundreds of times but has not said anywhere that women cannot obtain education. The first *wahi* begins with the word *iqra'* (i.e. recite) and many women accepted Islam much before their men folk did and recited the Holy Book regularly.

The women used to go to the Prophet regularly with their problems and even insisted that the Messenger of Allah fix one day especially for them and they used to flock to the Messenger of Allah asking him several questions. In many cases they used to be more eager to know than the men. Several women are counted among the *sahabiyat* (i.e. female companions of the Prophet).

Whenever the *Quran* uses the word '*'alim* or *ulema'* it includes both men and women and never is it used for men only. Other religions may or may not have put curbs on women and prevented them from acquiring knowledge but not Islam. And if Taliban burnt schools earlier in sheer anger to protest against Government of Pakistan, would it then not imply that they politicize *Shari'ah*? *Shari'ah* is the law of Islam and cannot be allowed to be politicized.

And it is wrong to think that Islamic law is static and only the medieval *ulema* had the right or knowledge to determine the law and no changes could be made in it in keeping with the problems and challenges appearing in the world. It is a mistaken belief that *Shari'ah* takes static view of the world. No student of Islam can deny that *ijtihad* (which implies utmost intellectual efforts to understand new emerging problems and challenges) is integral part of Islamic law. Iqbal, the noted philosopher-poet, calls it the dynamic principle of Islam.

Shari'ah is based on certain core values of the *Quran* which can never be ignored in any formulation of law. Justice ('*adl*) is one of them and most fundamental value and is among Allah's names (Allah is 'Adil). No law can ever violate this fundamental value and it is for this reason that even in two verses on polygamy (4:3 and 4:129), justice is most important condition and the *Quran* clearly says if you fear justice cannot be done then marry only one.

Let us remember, law is an instrument of justice and not end in itself. However, our traditional *ulema* unfortunately consider *Shari'ah* as an end itself. Justice is the end. A law may appear just in given circumstances but may not remain just with passage of time. Also, new problems and challenges may appear for which rethinking may become necessary. In no civilization law remains static. Even prominent jurists

differed from each other living in different cultural context.

For Taliban who are basically tribals first and then Muslims, law has got stuck in the past. It does not change as their society does not change. Hence, they are incapable of understanding dynamics of the changing world. Even it is not Allah's Will to keep the world He created static. We find in *Surah-al-Rahman* verse 29, "..Every day He manifests Himself in yet another (wonderous) way."

Thus, Allah Himself manifests every day in new ways and His law too cannot remain static. The Shari'ah also has to change (only values and norms will remain constant). Pakistan has modernized but tribal areas have lagged behind and remained ferociously patriarchal and hence, Taliban want to suppress women's rights and apply same medieval patriarchal values, not Quranic values which are equally fair to both genders.

Gender is after all not biological but a social construct and hence if society remains static the idea of gender all remains static and frozen. It is, thus, for Government of Pakistan to do justice to all its citizens and make people of Swat and Malakand also partners in progress of Pakistan and not allow Taliban or any agency to enforce medieval understanding of Islamic laws.



Banning *Burqa* Undemocratic

A draft bill was under consideration of French Parliament imposing a fine of Euro 700 on any woman wearing *burqa* covering her whole body in any public place and her husband twice as much if he forced her to wear it. This is for the first time that women would be penalized for wearing *burqa*. Earlier, France had banned Muslim girls wearing *hijab* in schools. It argued that these religious symbols interfered with its commitment to secularism and its secular culture.

In fact, nothing happens without political ideology being behind it. This measure is being championed by rightwing politicians who are exploiting anti-Islam feelings in France among a section of people under the cover of secularism. However, the socialists are opposed to any ban on *burqa* though they are also not in favour of women wearing *burqa*. They feel women should be discouraged rather than banning *burqa* (which includes covering face).

The socialist spokesman, Benoit Hamon, announced that wearing *burqa* was not desirable but they were not in favour of a legal ban. Hamon said on RTL Radio, "We are totally opposed to the *burqa*. The *burqa* is a prison for women and has no place in the French Republic. But an ad hoc law would not have the anticipated effect".

The stand taken by socialists appears to be at least logical. One cannot stop women from wearing *burqa* through a legal ban. It is quite undemocratic to punish one for wearing certain type of dress. It is anti-democratic and anti-secular for a multi-cultural society. Let it be very clear that to cover entire body including the face is not necessarily an Islamic way.

The ulema hold different views on the subject. Majority of them hold that covering face and hands is not prescribed by the *Quran* or *Sunnah*. Only very few theologians and jurists want women to be fully covered. To compel women to so cover their bodies and face is indeed against women's rights and dignity. And a woman should be a free agent to decide for herself what to wear within decent limits and cultural ethos.

However, this freedom also includes right of women to cover their face, if they so desire and if they think it is requirement of their religion. When I was lecturing in Bukhara University, among a class of women students all of whom were wearing skirts and their heads were uncovered, two women came fully covered including their faces. All other women demanded that these two *burqa* clad women should be thrown out.

I said imagine *burqa* clad women were in majority and two women had come wearing skirts and uncovered head and majority of *burqa* clad women had demanded those two women being thrown out, what would you feel. I, therefore, argued that let us not get violent because someone dresses unlike us. We should dialogue with them and persuade them, if we can, not to wear such a dress.

There could be number of reasons why one prefers to wear certain kind of dress. May be there is coercion by parents or husband, which is of course, undesirable. Or may be one thinks it is religious requirement and one tries to assert one's right. Or may be one is trying to fight cultural alienation. Certain dresses also become identity markers. Many Muslims who migrate from Asia and Africa experience cultural shock when they see French or other European women wearing scanty dresses, even wearing bikinis. Thus, they feel all the more compelled to wear their traditional dress.

Also, in France and several other European countries migrants are marginalized and have a feeling of alienation which pushes them into practising their own cultural norms. And then it is also to be remembered all Muslim women in France do not wear *burqua*. In fact, many Muslim women have integrated themselves into French society by taking to western dresses.

Thus, legal ban will only build up resistance among traditional Muslim women and they would try to defy the law resulting in social tensions. It would be far better to resort to persuasive ways to discourage traditional Muslim women not to wear *burqa*. And persuasion alone will not work unless backed by other measures, economic as well as social, to fight alienation of religious and cultural minorities.

Thus, one needs multi-pronged measures to contain this problem. Muslim Ulema and intellectuals living in France also have to adopt creative ways to reinterpret Islamic traditional sources to suit new conditions. It is quite necessary to revisit traditional sources rooted in medieval feudal culture.



Muslim Women and Change

Mostly people think Muslim women are oppressed and forced to wear the veil and confined to the four walls of their houses. This is mainly because we read every day in papers that the Taliban force women into veil, burn down girls schools and always portray them wrapped completely in black from head to toe. This image of Muslim women was further reinforced by the *burqa* controversy which erupted in France.

This image would be justified, if all Muslim women followed the strict dress code propounded by Muslim theologians, which was evolved in medieval ages and which they keep on justifying even today. But there is big difference in what is theologically projected and ground reality. It may not be wrong, if I venture to say that Muslim women have been defying theological code for more than a century now.

Today, Muslim women have gone even further in their public achievements. It is true, even today some Muslim theologians debate whether women have *naqisul aql* (defective reasoning power) but, many Muslim women have superseded their male counterparts in several fields. In Saudi Arabia, where women are not even permitted to drive cars, a woman became a licensed pilot and has been flying aircrafts.

We hear from Malaysia that Farah al-Habshi, an engineer by profession, has been appointed deputy of weapons and electrical officer in the spanking new Malaysian warship KD Perak. Today, she dons the white and blue Royal Malaysian Navy uniform. What is interesting is that she also wears *hijab* to cover her head though not her face. She feels her *hijab*, in no way, comes in the way of performing her duties.

Malaysia is an Islamic country and orthodox ulema exercise a great deal of control over people's lives. Recently, even the Government of Malaysia chickened out when the Ulema took a stand that Christians in Malaysia cannot use the word Allah in their religious literature or in their newspapers. Muslim women face several problems in that country at the hands of the conservative ulema in respect of family laws.

It is in the same country that a woman has been appointed naval officer on combat duty. Even in India, women have not won the right to be on combat duty in the navy and are not permitted to fly fighter planes or serve in combat arms. They are also not allowed seafaring in warships. Farah al-Habshi, on the other hand, recently participated in Milan naval exercise along with some other women.

Farah is also highly articulate and answered all the questions put to her by journalists. This is not an isolated example. Many Muslim women have excelled even in theological fields quite independently of the traditional theologians. They have shown courage to challenge orthodox ulema. Here I can give example of Amina Wudud of the US who teaches Islamic Studies in Washington.

She believes women can lead mixed congregations in prayer. She led around 100 persons, men and women in prayer a few years ago and that too on Friday and delivered Friday *khutba* (sermon), quite unthinkable in traditional Muslim world. It raised a storm of controversy and even Yusuf Qardawi, otherwise a moderate theologian from Qatar, wrote an article, opposing a woman leading mixed congregational prayer.

Some Kuwaiti women, elected to Kuwaiti parliament after a great deal of struggle, refused to wear hijab and fought for their right to go to parliament sessions without wearing one. They fought their case up to the Supreme Court of Kuwait and won. Many more examples can

be cited, of Muslim women daring authorities for their rights.

But media, which is interested in sensationalizing issues, refuses to highlight Muslim women's achievements and continues to portray them as submissive to traditional authorities, meekly accepting their situation. This image of Muslim women has to change and reality, which is much more complex, has to be understood.

This is not to deny that in many countries Muslim women are facing difficult problems and their liberation is not a foregone conclusion. However, it is also true, that many of them are fighting and refusing to submit meekly. What gives us hope is their continued struggle and defiance of traditional authorities.

It should also be mentioned here that many 'ulema and jurists also have realized that medieval shari'ah formulations about women cannot be enforced easily any more and some of them like Muhammad Abd-uh of Egypt, Maulavi Mumtaz Ali Khan of India and Maulana Umar Ahmed Usmani of Pakistan have expressed their serious reservations about traditional theological formulations on women. The determined struggle on the part of Muslim women will force many more theologians to revise their position and take the *Quran*, and not medieval theology, more seriously on women issues.



Muslim Women: Tradition and Modernity

Recently in a poetic recital on TV in Saudi Arabia a Muslim poetess Hissas Hilal burst out against the strict control regime for women in her country. It was a voice of protest and a very bold protest at that, perhaps unthinkable in her regimented society. It was of course in verses of her poem. She said through a veiled face, about Islamic preachers, "who sit in the position of power", but are "frightening" people with their fatwas and "preying like a wolf" on those seeking peace.

What is equally important is that she got loud cheers from the audience and won a place in the finals of the competition. It also brought her death threats, on several militant websites. The Saudi regime, controlled by Salafi ulema in religious matters are adamant on retaining strict control over women in the name of Islamic traditions. Women are denied their rights and free choice according to their conscience.

This may not be the condition in all Islamic countries but traditional Muslim societies impose several restrictions and are still not ready to relax. The kind of *hijab* many Muslim women wear, covering their faces and looking at the world only through two eye holes remains controversial among Muslim scholars, theologians and modern intellectuals. The question is, what is to be done?

No one can deny the fast pace of change in the globalised world and it is becoming increasingly challenging to retain present controls exercised on women in traditional societies. This controversy has been going on ever since modernity asserted itself in the 19th century. Many reforms took place in Muslim countries and women could win a degree of liberation.

However, the latter part of twentieth and beginning of twenty-first century saw re-emergence of traditional Islam, particularly Salafi Islam. No society registers linear progress and progressive measures, in turn bringing more challenges. The reasons, not to be discussed here are both economic and political, apart from social and cultural. This complex nature of tension between tradition and modernity is both a challenge and an opportunity.

What is important in this debate, which is often ignored, is that what we practice in the name of Islam is more cultural than religious or scriptural and also that we depend too much on tradition while defending or opposing the restrictions applied on women. A good example of this is a recent book published from Pakistan, "*Chehre ka parda wajib ya ghair wajib*" (Face Veil—Compulsory or Not) compiled by Prof Khurshid Alam. It is a very scholarly debate between two learned scholars one defending and the other opposing the face veil.

However, the book depends entirely on contradictory traditions of the Prophet (PBUH) and his companions cited by various medieval scholars. You find in abundance both kinds of traditions (hadith) insisting on face veil or thinking it unnecessary and both the scholars use these traditions to strengthen their position. This approach only reinforces traditional cultural Islam.

We should not ignore the fact that the most of the traditions, except those on moral, ethical grounds or pertaining to *ibadat* (worship), reflect Arab culture on the one hand, and medieval West Asian or Central Asian culture, on the other. The jurists have also maintained that Arab *adat* (customs and traditions) could become part of Shari'ah and many Shari'ahs incorporate the Arab '*adat*'.

In the book I am referring to, there is little direct approach to the

Quran or fresh reflections on the relevant Quranic verses. Let Muslim jurists and scholars realize that Arab 'adat are far from divine and should not necessarily form the basic structure of the Shari'ah. Today we must change this cultural base through direct reflections and fresh understanding of the Quranic verses relevant to women. This attempt would establish individual dignity and freedom of choice for women. Freedom of conscience is an important doctrine of the *Quran* and so is individual dignity. *Quran* is far more in harmony with human dignity and freedom than the traditional medieval cultural practices.

This approach will, in no way, injure the divine nature of Shari'ah and also would liberate it from its traditional cultural basis incorporating patriarchal values of Arab culture rather than the divine spirit of the *Quran*. This would liberate Muslim women and give them a sense of dignity and freedom, reducing tension between tradition and modernity. This opportunity should not be lost, causing more agony to women and creating dilemma of choice for them. Most of the Muslim women want to follow their religion and also enjoy certain benefits of modernity. The Muslim scholars and jurists should end this agony.



Shari'ah, Fatwas and Women's Rights

Every now and then, the media reports fatwas issued by *muftis* (Islamic chieftains) in India, Saudi Arabia and other countries. One *mufti* in Saudi Arabia suggested that if a Muslim woman has to keep a man for household work and interact with him though he is not *mehram* (from prohibited degree for marriage), she should suckle him from her breast to make him *mehram*. This fatwa was based on a hadith narrated by Hazrat A'isha.

Dar-ul Uloom Deoband, though does commendable work for peace and communal harmony, issues fatwas when it comes to women which make women subservient to men. Recently, when someone from Dubai jocularly typed on his computer *talaq* thrice, he was told his wife had now been divorced and he could not marry her until she married someone else who then divorced her and then only she could revert to her former husband.

In Iran, a middle-aged woman was punished to death by stoning as she was alleged to have committed adultery. The *Quran* nowhere mentions such a punishment and prescribes only 100 lashes for *zina* and in Arabic there is only one word be it rape, fornication or adultery. More recently, Dar-ul Uloom Deoband issued a fatwa saying that if a

husband said the word *talq* thrice on mobile and even if she did not hear it, divorce had taken place and she must marry someone else as a necessary condition.

These fatwas are issued just because some jurist had so opined hundreds of years ago, keeping in view the conditions then prevailing in the society. On most of these issues, there is no *ijma'* (consensus) and many of them are based on controversial hadith. The opinion given by jurists hundreds of years ago were based not only on the *Quran* or hadith but also on social structure and social ethos then prevailing.

Most of the Ulema or jurists, when asked for fatwa, consult only those medieval sources and never bother to apply their own reasoning power. *Taqlid* (mechanical following) is considered as safest by all these jurists. However, even in those days many jurists had strongly condemned *taqlid*. Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Hazm both were great jurists and both have condemned thoughtless imitation.

Ibn Hazm was from Spain and used to give great importance to freedom of thought and independence of thinking in his juristic thinking. In this he was influenced by his teacher Abul Khayar. He was also of the opinion that one can be called 'Alim as long as one engages in seeking knowledge. But one who thinks he knows enough is, in fact, *jahil* (ignorant). And seeking knowledge is seeking truth which is possible only through intellectual process. Our Ulema and jurists, as we know, have long since stopped thinking.

The *Quran* is the fundamental source for Islamic jurisprudence but Ibn Hazm, very rightly puts Quranic verses in three categories: 1) those verses which need no other source to understand; 2) those verses which can be understood in the light of other verses of the *Quran* and 3) those verses which can be understood in the light of authentic hadith authentic being, one which has been narrated by most reliable and many narrators. Even if this method is followed, Islamic jurisprudence, especially in respect of family laws, can be revolutionized.

Most of the jurists unfortunately rely, in matters of family laws, more on weak hadith than on the *Quran*. Ibn Hazm, who apparently followed Zahiri School (but not by way of *taqlid*) strongly criticizes those who do

not think by themselves and simply resort to *taqlid*. And Ibn Hazm said all this in 14th century Spain. Our jurists live in the 21st century and yet resort to mechanical following of their respective schools.

In fact another Spanish jurist Al-Shatibi was also very creative in his thinking about shari'ah. He said that one must first understand the *maqasid* and *masalih* i.e. basic objectives and welfare of people for whom shari'ah are being framed. Our muftis and jurists do not at all keep these objectives and welfare of people in mind and simply consult standard books of their respective schools (of jurisprudence) and issue fatwas.

It is because of these fatwas that Islam is negatively projected in the media and then we complain against media for its Islam bashing. A truly religious person should look at his/her own fault first before blaming others. As someone said, we try to remove dust from the mirror instead of from our own face. The mirror is going to show dust on our face in any case as long as it is on our face.

Today it is highly necessary to dust off our own face and restore dignity of Islamic shari'ah by re-thinking several issues pertaining to personal laws, restoring dignity and rights of women as given by the *Quran*. Imitation should be thrown out of the window and all eminent jurists from across the world should come together and compile corpus of laws giving equal rights to women in the matters of marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc.

There is no doubt if we keep *maqasid al-shari'ah* (objectives) and *masalih al-shari'ah* (welfare of people) and resort to independent thinking and freedom of thought, the Islamic laws would become not only highly just but a model to be followed by all. Ibn Hazm, for example, was of the opinion that if a man is economically weak and a woman who wishes to be divorced, well off, it is for divorced wife to maintain her former husband, something which modern law stipulates. We must go directly to the *Quran* and accept only very authentic hadith and Muslim women will become more equal.



A Fatwa that Stirred Muslims

As per Dar-ul Ulum, Deoband, if a woman works in any government or public office with other men, the income will be *haram* (prohibited) for her family. The fatwa issued by it was published prominently in the *Times of India*. This stirred a hornets' nest and a large number of Muslim women and men, including some ulema opposed the fatwa and Dar-ul Ulum had to say it never issued such a fatwa and that it had only responded to a question about women working in public offices.

There are two things involved here. One is that Muslims no longer unquestioningly accept what our Ulema say in such matters, particularly relating to women and their rights. Even some Ulema questioned the legitimacy of this fatwa. Second, and the most disturbing is, that our Ulema continue to be text-oriented. Whatever text was produced by our predecessors under very different conditions has become sacred for them and must be adhered to, irrespective of the impact their decisions are going to have on the society.

Most of the Ulema who defended the fatwa argue that women can work in what they call *shari i hudud* (limits of shariah). First, the question arises why apply these *shari i hudud* only to women? And, secondly, who will define these limits? For these ulema any mixing of men and women

is an act of *fitna* (mischief). For them a woman's character and integrity has no meaning or significance at all. If she raises the veil from her face in a mixed gathering, she is transformed into a *fitna*.

There are several instances in the Holy Prophet's life when men and women came together and Hazrat A'isha even led the battle of Jamal (Camel). There were hundreds of *sahaba* (companions) around and no one told her not to venture out of the home to take part in the battle. Shifa bint-e-Abdullah, a leading lady, was appointed by Hazrat Umar as market inspector and no one protested. What was she doing as a market inspector? Dealing with women alone?

The *Quran*, which is the primary source of shariah, does not refer to *hijab* (veil) for ordinary women at all. On the other hand, it advises women not to display their *zeenah* (adornments) publicly (24:31) but refrains from defining what constitutes *zeenah* or adornment. It has been defined by various commentators depending on their cultural environment. The *Quran* does not even say whether they should cover their heads, let alone faces. It says, on the other hand, "except what appears thereof" leaving space for interpretation. There is near agreement among commentators that face and two hands should remain open. However, it advises women to cover their breasts.

This above verse is preceded by advice to both men and women. Men, that they lower their gaze and restrain their sexual passions (protect their sexual organs) and believing women lower their gaze and protect their sexual organs (24:30). In fact, this is the most important part of these two verses. The verse 30 is often ignored in which men are equally responsible for lowering their gaze and restraining their sexual passion.

But the entire responsibility is put on women that they should cover themselves, including their faces, lest they should become source of *fitna* (mischief). The *Quran* has put this responsibility on both men and women to restrain themselves. It is unfortunate that when it comes to women we totally ignore even what can be called *maqasid al-shari'ah* (i.e. intentions of shariah) and only woman is held responsible for her behaviour.

Throughout the *Quran*, men and women have been described as

equally responsible for their deeds (*amal*) and will be given equal reward or punishment for whatever they do. For clarity on this one must carefully study the verse 33:35, besides several other verses in the *Quran*.

What our ulema call *shar-i-hudud* were fixed by men who considered women as secondary to men and unequal in status due to cultural attitude towards them in the medieval era. The whole idea has to be thoroughly revised in keeping with the true spirit of the *Quran*. Also, one needs to develop proper methodology and frame-work to understand Quranic intentions in totality, not in pieces, as our commentators have been doing.



Session – II

Religious Issues in Islam

Real Jihad – Martyrdom of Husain

Every year we observe the martyrdom of Imam Husain as a ritual. We make speeches, repeat the story of Karbala and if we happen to be Shari'ah we do *matam*, weep over the tragedy and it is all over until next year. We never deeply reflect over it nor do we draw any lesson to be applied to our daily lives. If Imam Husain is a role model for whole humanity, as we never tire of saying this, how much we ourselves follow it in our own life? Best way of rendering anything harmless to our interest is to ritualize it.

Today we are faced with the problem of terrorism in the name of jihad and yet we never seriously reflect on the meaning of jihad in the mirror of events of Karbala. Every terrorist now calls himself a 'jihadi' so that his act of terror can be glorified among his fellow religionists. If we want to learn real meaning of jihad we must understand events of Karbala for what they are. Without understanding great act of jihad in Karbala we can never understand its meaning.

Khawaja Moinuddin Chishti of Ajmer called Imam Husain in his often quoted *rubai* as *bina-i-la ilah*. This is greatest tribute one can pay to the Imam and his sacrifice through jihad in Karbala. If we want to understand the significance of Imam's jihad in Karbala let us see how

Allah's Messenger (PBUH) defined jihad. He said real jihad is speaking truth in the presence of a tyrant ruler. This is best form of jihad and most difficult also.

It requires not only tremendous courage but also readiness to sacrifice one's life to do this jihad. Imam Husain did precisely that. He not only sacrificed his life by speaking truth in the face of Yazid, the great tyrant of his time but also sacrificed many of his near and dear ones without a moment's hesitation.

Allah's name is Truth (*Haq*) and those who do not have courage to speak truth can be anything but pure Muslim. Those who worship Allah and want the path shown by Allah to survive, it should be paved with nothing but truth. Our path and that of so called *jihadis* path is paved with falsehood and revenge. Jihad can be waged only by those who have no selfish desire and their act should be only an act of truth, done only for truth and for raising banner of truth.

Husain had no selfish desire. He was not aspiring to be the next ruler of Muslims. He did not want to submit to falsehood represented by Yazid and his oppressive establishment perpetrating oppression. Power for the sake of power is the most dangerous thing in the world. It is the source of all injustices. Only just power is one which is exercised for the sake of truth. Only such power could be just.

Islam did not come for Muslims to become rulers. But it came to establish power of truth and to expose truth of power (for power's sake). Yazid represented power for power's sake. What was most painful was that Yazid grabbed power in the name of Islam which came to humanity for disseminating power of truth. If the Imam had not challenged him, he would not have discharged his Islamic duty.

Imam who was brought up in the house of Prophet and had deeply imbibed all Islamic values could never have shirked his duty and so he fought forces of falsehood with purest of intention. Real jihad is fought only and only for truth that is in the way of Allah to establish power of truth and but for Imam's sacrifices in Karbala truth of Islam could have been subdued. Husain could not have sat back and watched helplessly.

But in all this Husain nowhere expressed his wish to become ruler in place of Yazid. His struggle was not for power but for Islam and he through his sacrifices defeated forces of oppression (*zulm*) and injustice. For Husain power, if at all, was only a means, not an end. Jihad becomes necessary when power becomes an end, instead of means. Since the Imam waged jihad for establishment of truth the Saint of Ajumer called him *bina-i-la ilah*. Indeed Husain re-established and reinforced this *bina* in Karbala.

There is another message which one should derive from Imam's struggle in Karbala. It is not physical victory which matters. Yazid scored one. It is in fact spiritual victory which matters, which ultimately changes the world and which commands our respect. Husain scored spiritual victory. Physical defeat is not real defeat. Yazid is eternally damned despite his physical victory.

This holds good for all struggles waged for human ideals, for justice, for truth. Such struggles demand nothing but sacrifices. Many Muslim kings scored great victories, no one glorifies those victories as much as Imam's physical defeat but spiritual victory. All those who fight for noble causes are following in the footprints of the great Imam. It is such jihad which would transform our world.



Religion, Compassion and Islam

Religious leaders round the globe gathered together some years ago and drafted a charter of compassion. According to them "Compassion should be the plinth of religions." Prominent among the religious leaders who signed the charter of compassion were Karen Armstrong, Egypt's Grand Mufti Sheikh Ali Goma and Dalai Lama.

The charter calls for restoring compassion to the centre of morality and religion and ensuring that youth are given accurate information about other traditions, religions and cultures to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity and to cultivate an informed empathy. The Charter underlines that the principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat others as we wish to be treated ourselves.

I would like to discuss this centrality of compassion from Islamic viewpoint. In fact, the *Quran* repeatedly describes Allah as compassionate and merciful and so those who worship Allah have to be merciful and compassionate else what is the use of worshipping a being whose values we do not follow. It is known to every Muslim that he/she has to begin any work with incantation of *bismillahir rahman al-rahim* (I begin in the name of Allah who is compassionate and merciful). Is then

compassion and mercy not at the centre of Islam?

But it is highly unfortunate that Islam today is known more for 'jihad' than mercy and compassion. Who is responsible for that? Is Islam responsible for that or those Muslims. A handful of them of course, who use Islam mainly for pursuit of power. Today it is Buddhism which is known for compassion rather than Islam. It is true that in Buddhism too, compassion is a central value, but so is in Islam.

Why then, Islam has never been known for compassion in its entire history? The reason is, unlike Buddhism, Islam got associated with power right from beginning. Islam appeared among Arabs to begin with, and violence was rampant among Arab tribals. Islam, therefore, made peace and compassion central values so that Arabs give up violence and make peace and compassion as part of their day today conduct.

However, the entire human history shows ideals do not become real and it is a reality which prevails over ideals and Arabs were no exception to this. It is precisely for this reason that we see so much of bloodshed in Islamic history during Umayyad and Abbasid periods and Hajjaj among Umayyads and Saffah among Abbasids went down in history as great murderers. This continued throughout Islamic history and jihad which never meant war in Quranic terminology was used by rulers for war and bloodshed.

It is high time this centrality of jihad which has got new lease of life with terrorists in action, is corrected and once again compassion assumes centrality as in Quranic values. It should get much needed priority. Not that no one ever did not understand this Quranic message. The Sufis did and kept themselves apart from power struggle among different dynasties and groups. They emphasized peace, love and compassion rather than power. They emphasized spiritual over material. Sufis like Ibn Arabi and Maulana Rum made love central to Islamic ethics and Muslim masses always followed them.

However, the ruling classes always emphasized rituals on one hand, and jihad, on the other so that their oppressive and exploitative rule is accepted. Oppression (*zulm*) is greatest evil according to the Quranic ethics yet it became common place in Islamic history and Ulama came

out with a doctrine that to avoid anarchy even a *zalim* (oppressor) must be followed if he enforces *salah* (prayer).

This was a great setback to Quranic ethics. *Salah* is not an end but means to an end but now *salah* became an end in itself. Dr Iqbal had rightly pointed out in his *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* that religion in its higher form was neither dogma nor rituals. However, all of us who greatly appreciate Iqbal's poetry never spare a thought for such statements of Iqbal.

Today thanks to Al-Qaida and Taliban, Islam has been reduced to killing innocent people to gain power and wealth. There should be strong opposition and all sources encouraging such bloodbath must stop. Though it is too late but even now all the Ulema from Islamic world must come out strongly in opposition to such gross misuse of Islam in contemporary period. The Muslim Ulema should also draw up charter of ethics and give it wide publicity to alienate these terrorists from Muslim masses. To remain silent in the face of such horrific killings is to be part of it.



Does Riba Include Bank Interest?

The controversy about permissibility or prohibition of bank interest started in colonial times i.e. 19th century onwards when banking institution came to Islamic world. In Egypt too this controversy raged during that period. It is said that the Grand Mufti of Egypt Muhammad Abduh had permitted interest on postal savings though the fatwa issued by him is not available now.

Many ask me, "Is banking interest prohibited in Islam?" Most of the jurists maintain it is not permissible and Muslims should not accept interest on their bank deposits. In later part of 20th century, many Muslim intellectuals came out with the concept of Islamic banking based on *mudaraba* and profit sharing. Number of Islamic banks were started in Muslim and non-Muslim countries with large Muslim population.

Still the question continues to be asked is banking interest permissible and there is no unanimity of opinion on this question. There are many Islamic scholars who feel banking interest is not prohibited. Many modern commentators of the *Quran* also translate *riba* as usury and not simple banking interest. From Pakistan, Prof Fazlur Rehman who had migrated to the US and taught in Chicago University for number of years wrote very well-argued paper on permissibility or otherwise of

banking interest and came to the conclusion that banking interest is not prohibited. Even those who do not agree with this view must read this article. It is very scholarly and based on original sources.

What is *riba*? The *Quran* strongly condemns the institution of *riba*. It says, "Those who swallow usury (*riba*) cannot arise except as he arises whom the devil prostrates by (his) touch. That is because they say, trading is only like usury. And Allah has allowed trading and forbidden usury. To whomsoever then the admonition has come from his Lord, and he desists, he shall have what has already passed. And his affair is in the hands of Allah. And whoever returns (to it) – those are the companions of the Fire: there they will abide. (2:275)

The *Quran* also goes on to say, But if you do (it) not, (i.e. continue to take *riba*), then be apprised of war from Allah and His Messenger; and if you repent, then you shall have your capital. Wrong not and you shall not be wronged." (2:279)

Thus, we see if one continues to take *riba*, the *Quran* not only warns against it but even permits war against the usurer. Is bank interest so severe in consequences as to be warned of war? Banking interest is taken and given by hundreds of thousands of Muslims all over the world including in Islamic countries. Should Islamic state declare war against them? No country ever does it. Let alone war, they are not given any punishment.

Then what is *riba*? Its root meaning in Arabic is growth, and here obviously it is unjust growth. One should not fatten oneself at the cost of others which leads to gross injustices. Our justices unfortunately overlook completely the stock exchange operations in this respect. It is based on pure speculation. One either becomes millionaire overnight or is ruined completely if share prices crash. Islam permits only just growth which one earns in permissible way through ones hard work physical or intellectual or both. Speculation is strictly prohibited by the Prophet (PBUH). For example, it is not permissible to buy a standing crop in the field as one does not know how much it would be maturing and how much will be destroyed? To buy cheap standing crop amounts to speculation and exploitation of peasants. Many middlemen thrive on such speculations.

Our justices hardly ever condemn such practices, not even speculative operations of stock exchange. Many people become rich overnight by speculations in share. On the contrary our jurists allow share trade without any restrictions. There were no banks during the time Islam appeared on the scene. People used to borrow money from private money lenders and return double the amount. Thus we see *riba* was doubling of double (3:129) which ruined the poor borrowers who often borrowed either for personal needs or small trade. This is certainly condemnable and all governments take action against such practices.

The banking interest is far from ruinous and its rate is fixed by market operations to increase or decrease liquidity in case of inflation or deflation. Bank cannot be conceived as an exploiting institution. On the other hand, it is a regulatory institution facilitating financial operations between borrowers and lenders. Some jurists argue that interest is not permissible as there is no element of risk in it and its rate is fixed. There is no such argument in the *Quran*. If this argument is valid then even investing in building and giving on rent will not be permissible as rent is fixed and there is no risk involved. The *Quran* denounces *riba* exploitative practice leading to unjust growth not because there is no element of risk in it.

In view of above arguments banking interest cannot be *riba* and should be permissible.



Reason and Faith – Complimentary or Antagonistic?

Are reason and faith (*imaan*) antagonistic or complimentary? Depends from what perspective you look at them. The nineteenth century was century of reason and faith came to be challenged by the rationalists. Even today rationalists denounce faith as mere superstition. The *Quran*, however, strikes the middle path and emphasizes importance of both – faith as well as reason.

Today this truth is dawning on us that neither faith alone nor reason by itself, can suffice. Both are needed for a successful and meaningful life. Reason alone can make us skeptical and faith alone can make us superstitious. Since rationalists were severely persecuted by the organized religion, they adopted the extreme position of denouncing the faith altogether and stressed sufficiency of reason.

The *Quran* invites human beings to have faith as well as to reflect and think. While reason gives us light, faith gives us deeper conviction and, it should be noted, no action is possible without deeper conviction (*imaan*). The synthesis of reason and faith ('*aql* and *imaan*) can be called 'rational faith'. As escapticism (reason without faith) can paralyze action, blind faith (faith without reason) can reduce us to unthinking zealot. And both can be harmful to the society.

Islam arose among the Meccan Arabs to begin with who were quite practicable people. The creamy layer in Mecca was indulging in trade and commerce and hence they tended to be practical in outlook unlike agriculturists who tend to be more superstitious as their life depends primarily on natural forces. Thus Arabs believed in practical rationality. They did not have much time for reflection and finer values of life and otherworldly matters. For them everything was here and now – profit, accumulation of wealth and comfortable life. It was the main purpose of life for them. They were least bothered that their way of life was causing misery to the lower classes that were immersed in superstitions.

The *Quran* stressed values like equality, human dignity, compassion and caring for poor and downtrodden, something neglected and ridiculed by this creamy layer of Arabs. Thus Quranic teachings meant a revolution for them. It gave them light of reason as well as faith to give their life a new meaning and direction.

However, when Islam spread to other countries like Iraq, Iran and Egypt, it came face to face with more complex cultures and *weltanschauung*. Also, unlike the Umayyads, Abbasids depended more on newly emerging Iranian middle class for administrative support and hence Mu'tazila acquired primacy during their rule. And translation of Greek toms of philosophy deeply influenced the Muslim intellectuals as Darul Hikmah became storehouse of wisdom.

Thus, reason began to acquire primacy in the Islamic world and philosophers like Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and others mostly of Iranian origin) great prominence and prestige so much so that their books became valuable source of study in European universities also. This caused unrest among a section of Muslim ulama and orthodox scholars. Many prominent ulama refused to accept Mu'tazila doctrines which Abbadis rulers tried to enforce with the might of government. The bitter controversy about creation of the *Quran* (the belief that the *Quran* is created and not co-eternal with Allah) divided the Muslim world.

The sufis were also not comfortable with emphasis on reason as against spirituality. Also, there was an interesting controversy that while Mu'tazila maintained that something is good because reason says so

and hence it becomes good in the Shari'ah law but the orthodox ulama maintained that something is good because Shari'ah law says it is good. Thus Shari'ah law is absolute and God-given.

The Sufis in general and Ghazzali in particular was quite uncomfortable with widespread influence of reason in the Islamic world at the cost of spirituality and orthodoxy. An interesting debate took place between Ibn Rushd (Averroes) and Ghazzali. Ghazzali wrote a book *Tahafut al-Falasifa* (Bewilderment of Philosophers) to which Averroes replied by writing *Tahafut-Tahafut al-Falasifa* (Bewilderment of Bewilderment of Philosophers).

This debate between reason and faith is a milestone in the intellectual history of Islam and masses went with Ghazzali, not with Averroes. Averroes is known only to a few intellectuals and philosophers whereas Ghazzali, like other Sufis, has great following among the masses of Muslims. Ghazzali maintains that reason leads only to doubt and uncertainty whereas faith leads to deeper conviction. Well, philosophers may be comfortable with uncertainty and consider this a price with paying for better understanding. But, many others, with spiritual bent of mind, opt for deeper conviction which faith alone can provide. But the *Quran* emphasizes both and one, without the other, leaves us either intellectually blind or unable to act.



Justice Central to Shar'iah

Most of our ulema insist that Shar'iah is divine and hence there is no question of any flexibility in its application. It is supposed to be immutable. This does not bear scrutiny though.

Imam al-Shatibi, a Spanish imam of great eminence in the 13th century, discusses in his writings on the Shari'ah in *Al-Maqasid al-Sharia* as well as *Al-Masalih al-Sharia* the purposes and welfare of Shari'ah. The law is obviously devised to serve certain purposes and is meant for the welfare of the people. If it becomes rigid it can neither serve the purpose nor can it aim at the welfare of the people. Even Imam Ghazzali who tends to be orthodox in his views, always discusses the purpose behind every Shari'ah provision.

The *Quran* says in verse 5:48 that we have appointed a law and a way for everyone, which means that the Shari'ah is supposed to serve the purpose of every community and it has to keep the welfare of various communities in mind. There is unanimity among the ulema that customary law (*adaat*) also becomes an integral part of Shari'ah. That is why Arab customary law (*Arab aadat*) became an integral part of the Islamic Shari'ah. If Arab customary law had not become part of the Shari'ah it would not have been acceptable to Arabs.

When Islam spread to different parts of the world the local customary laws also became part of Islam in their respective cultures. In Indonesia a great controversy erupted among the ulema whether Indonesian customary law should be part of Islam, and a majority of the ulema accepted Indonesian customary law as part of Islam as practised in that country.

It was for this reason that in early Islam a provision was made for *ijtihad* (creative interpretation through utmost intellectual exertion). Allama Iqbal called *ijtihad* the dynamic spirit of Islam. However, our ulama closed the doors on *ijtihad* in the 13th century. And Shari'ah law has become stagnant ever since, because this law was based on *ijtihad* up to that point in time. The argument given by the ulama for not undertaking *ijtihad* was that no one was qualified to do so anymore. However, the fact is that the real reason for abandoning *ijtihad* is the stagnation of society that has prevailed since then.

As time passes new challenges arise, and it is only the spirit of *ijtihad* which can keep the Shari'ah dynamic and enable it to meet new challenges. A stagnant law becomes a burden for the people rather than resulting in their welfare. That is why reform movements became necessary from time to time. In the 19-20th centuries, new radical situations arose and many eminent Islamic thinkers launched reform movements. Jamaluddin Afghani, Mohammed Abduh, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Mohammed Iqbal were among them. What is most important in the Shari'ah is the principles and values given by the *Quran*. If we keep that in mind and protect these principles and values the real spirit of Shari'ah would not be injured even if certain necessary changes were made to applicable laws. However, we have often ignored these principles and values and made medieval formulation more central and rigid in their application. It was like throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Among the Quranic principles and values, justice is most important. Justice is the very basis of Shari'ah. If we protect the medieval formulations rather than the Quranic value of justice, it will result in more injustice, thus defeating the very purpose of Shari'ah. One of the examples is polygamy. The *Quran* permitted polygamy subject to

the rigorous condition of doing equal justice to all four wives; and the *Quran* also made it clear in verse 4:129 that even if one wanted to, one could not do justice.

Despite such a rigorous condition of justice, somehow the number of four wives became more important than the value of justice. It is only in modern times that some Muslim intellectuals are emphasizing justice rather than the number of wives that can be taken at a time. But even today conservative ulema think that marrying up to four wives is a man's privilege even if it seriously injures the value of doing justice to all four, which the *Quran* says is not humanly possible.

Some even go to the extent of saying that it will promote prostitution if a man is not allowed to marry up to four wives. Many more examples can be given wherein orthodox formulations have become more important than the value of justice in the *Quran*. Justice should be restored to its central position in the application of Shari'ah. This is only possible when the Shari'ah is not treated as a stagnant law and Muslim intellectuals come forward to attempt comprehensive *ijtihad*.



Quran Modernity and Post-modernity

The general perception is that the *Quran* is anti-diluvian and hinders all progress. It is against modernity and non-compatible with modern ways of life. Those who believe in this are of three types of people: those who are, for reasons of their own compulsively anti-Islam; two, those who are atheists and are opposed to all religions and spirituality and three, those who are rationalists and consider religious teachings as anti-rational and hence to be rejected.

We do not want to discuss here the case of anti-Islamic forces as they have their own politics and can least be expected to examine Islamic teachings dispassionately and rationally. However, case of atheists and rationalists is little different. They are not necessarily anti-Islam but anti-religion in general. But the problem with them is of different kind.

They become victims of cultural, linguistic confusion besides practices which can be ascribed to customs and traditions rather than religion and instead of understanding the complex relationship involved between religion, culture, language customs and traditions, damn the religion straightaway. However, the case of those hostile to Islam, not religion, is quite different. They damn Islam and the *Quran*, not religion in general.

For them the *Quran* is a forged document, some saying Muhammad (PBUH) has written it and some say it was written over two to three hundred years by various people from different geographical and cultural areas. To say the least their reading of the *Quran* is not only partial, selective, prejudiced but downright hostile. One must study their writings and reply point to point with in depth scholarship and patience. Condemnation will not do.

I am making very different point here. I have been studying the *Quran* for last forty years and also have actively engaged socially to bring about reform and change for which I studied various reformist as well as revolutionary movement and also implications of modernity and post-modernity. I found that the *Quran*, if studied from modern and post-modern perspectives, helps us cope with both.

What have been the characteristics of modernity: Freedom of conscience, individual and human dignity, democracy, gender equality and scientific outlook. The *Quran* lays stress on freedom of conscience (2:256), democratic and collective decision making (42:38), dignity of human beings (17:70), gender equality (2:228, 33:35) and numerous verses to reflect on creation of this universe, creation of human beings, animals and so on to encourage scientific outlook through inductive process.

No wonder then physics, mathematics, optics, chemistry besides rational philosophy prospered during the first four centuries of Islam and became source material for European universities and subsequent scientific developments. This has been acknowledged by various European scholars and historians. However, decline began when for various reasons political and others (also traditionalists reaction to excessive importance being given to rational sciences by philosophers and scientists) when traditionalists and conservatives became a dominant force and hijacked Islamic teachings making traditions central instead of Quranic values.

I would also like to assert here that the *Quran* is no less compatible for post-modernity, in fact most compatible to it as it made religious pluralism and multi-culturalism as the very basis of creation (5:48 and several other verses). It exhorted Muslims to show equal respect for

other prophets (Biblical and others) as all of them have been sent by Allah in different languages and the *Quran* is in Arabic only because it is addressing the Arabs primarily and to others through them.

It also asserted that different tribes, races, colors and languages are only for identity, not superiority and that no religion, language or culture has hegemony over others. Also, another characteristic of post-modernity is to negate absolute hegemony of reason (in this respect modernity also tends to be quite intolerant rejecting everything extra-rational) and accepts faith and makes faith and reason fundamental to meaningful human existence.

Thus the *Quran* while accepting importance of material existence and bodily needs, does not neglect, like modernists did, the forces of faith, tradition and culture which the post-modernity does. However, it is highly regrettable that our Ulema, immersed in traditional learning have lost sight of these important insights of the *Quran* and wholly rely only on narratives developed through medieval ages.

It is only those Ulema who are not only well versed in traditional Islamic learning but also in modern and post-modern social, political and economic movements who can understand these insights in the divine book and can project Islam in right perspective. Our Ulama unfortunately have become reactive and defensive and lost the spirit of original thinking and reflection which the *Quran* encouraged. It is *tafakkur* (reflection) on whole universe which will help Muslims progress not merely by defending medieval traditions. Earlier we realize better it is for us.



Can Gates of Ijtihad be Closed?

After the *fatwa* from Deoband (some of the Deobandis deny that *fatwa* was ever issued) that Muslim women cannot work with strangers from amongst the men and that her earnings are *haram* (prohibited), a debate is raging on the need for *ijtihad* (creative reinterpretation of law). It is often suggested that gates of *ijtihad* that were closed after sack of Baghdad in 1258 be reopened.

First of all we would like to point out that there is no church in Islam and no single authority and hence no one can issue a *dictat* to close the gates of *ijtihad*. Or re-open it. When Ibn Taymiyyah issued the *fatwa* on jihad after sack of Baghdad he went against the authority of his own Hanbali School and gave *fatwa* on his own authority. Hanbali school requires submission to the ruling authority.

Ijtihad has been the very part of process of law making in Islam. The root meaning of *ijtihad* (derived from *jahada*) is to strive, to make efforts and it is called *ijtihad* when one makes utmost intellectual assertion to understand a phenomenon and find a solution to it. Technically, it was used by Ma'adh bin Jabal who was appointed *'Amil* (Governor) of Yemen and when the Prophet (PBUH) asked him how will you govern if you do not find any ruling in the *Quran* and my *sunnah*, he said *ana*

ajtahidu i.e. I will strive to understand the problem myself and find the way out. The Holy Prophet approved of it.

All great imams and founders of different schools of law (called *mazahib*) resorted to *ijtihad* in arriving at the solution of various problems they confronted. The word *fiqh* which is often used for Islamic jurisprudence also means to know, understand and comprehend and hence the word *fiqh* became integral part of Islamic jurisprudence and experts of Islamic law are also referred to as *faqih*.

The whole process of law making in Islam has been most dynamic and spread over few centuries and represents one of the greatest law making ventures in human history. When Islam spread to non-Arab cultures in Asia and Africa, the Ulema were faced with new problems and often baffling challenges. They exerted themselves intellectually and tried to find solution in the light of Quranic pronouncements and values and *sunnah* of the Prophet (PBUH). They also invented useful tools like *qiyas* (analogical reasoning) and *ijma'* i.e. consensus among experts.

Why were these tools necessary? Because often they could not find solutions directly in the *Quran* and *sunnah*. The process of law making had begun right in the beginning when conquests brought Muslims face to face with new problems. Thus dynamic spirit of Islamic law was suffused in the very process. It never ignored objective conditions and new situations arising from time to time. The stagnation in the process was not because of sack of Baghdad but was result of stagnation in the society.

A new process of change began again during the period of colonization when Islamic thinkers came once again, face to face with modernity. Modernity posed new challenges before them and many great Islamic thinkers rose to the occasion and began to reformulate. There are shining examples of brilliant thinkers like Muhammad Abduh of Egypt who rose to be Grand Mufti of Egypt. He issued series of *fatwas* on postal saving interests, *Transvaal fatwa* for South African Muslims to eat animals slaughtered by Christians, necessity for modern education and so on. He was one of the most dynamic thinkers Egypt produced in 19th-20th century Egypt. Rashid Raza, his disciple, though not as bold, continued his work.

Sir Syed and his team also did commendable work during nineteenth century India. Sir Syed's *tafsir* (commentary on the *Quran*) is a seminal contribution and represents the dynamic spirit of *ijtihad* and fresh thinking, but unfortunately, he had to discontinue writing due to stiff opposition from conservative Ulema. This *tafsir* which was not available has been published by Khudabakhsh Oriental Library in two volumes.

Sir Syed's work was continued by great scholars like Maulavi Mumtz Ali Khan, Maulavi Chiragh Ali and several others who once again infused dynamic spirit in Islamic law. So what is needed is profound scholarship and intellectual courage to break stagnation instead of lamentations about doors of *ijtihad* being closed. Let us flung them open and break the stagnation.



On Being Kafir

In recent plane crash in Pakistan, a Hindu youth who was a member of Youth Parliament, Pakistan, died and someone wrote on his coffin 'kafir' which ignited a controversy and many Pakistanis condemned it. Nevertheless it becomes necessary to understand why and how many Muslims think and treat non-Muslims as *kafirs*.

It is necessary to understand the word *kafir* etymologically, historically as well as theologically. First let us understand its meaning. 'Kafara' literally means hide. According to Imam Raghib in his classic work *Mufradat al-Qur'an*, a peasant is called *kafir* as he hides seeds below soil for growing crop and night is also called *kafir* as it hides light.

And, theologically, it came to mean those who hide truth are *kafirs*. Every prophet brings truth from Allah, those accept it are called believers and those who do not are called *kafirs* as they refuse to accept truth and hide it. According to the *Quran*, those who believe in previous prophets sent by Allah are also believers as those prophets also came with truth from Allah. Since the truth from Allah was contained in the book given to them they were also called *ahl al-kitab* (people of the book).

Some of them have been mentioned in the *Quran* but many others have not been named. According to the *Quran*, the list of the

prophets named is illustrative, not exhaustive. Muslims believe there came 1,24,000 prophets and the *Quran* says Allah sent a guide (*haad*) for every nation. Thus, if there is no mention of a nation or the book it should not automatically mean people of that nation or community have hidden truth and so are *kafirs*.

Mazher Jan-i-Janan, an eminent Sufi saint of the 18th century, Delhi, was asked by one of his disciples that since Hindus worship idols should they be condemned as '*kafirs*'? Jan-i-Janan wrote back to him a well studied and well thought out reply. He said that Hindus, according to their *Shashtras* (holy books) believe in God who is *nirankar* and *nirgun* (i.e. without form and attributes) and this is highest form of *tawhid* (i.e. unity of God). Their holy books do not mention idol worship.

Then he refers to Quranic verse that every nation has been sent a guide and he argues how can Allah forget a great nation like Hindustan and not send His guide there. Maybe Ram and Krishna who are highly respected by Hindus were such guides. He maintains that we cannot say that Hindus do not believe in truth as they also call *Ishwar* as *Satyam* (Truth). As Dara Shikoh also points out in his *Majma' al-Bahrain* (Co-mingling of Two Oceans) Hindus call *Ishwar* as *Satyam*, *Shivam* and *Sundaram* (Truth, Almighty and Beautiful) and all three names of Allah are in the *Quran* i.e. Haq, Jabbar and Jamil.

Thus, Jan-i-Janan also argues theologically Hindus are believer in one God and cannot be called hiders of Truth or *kafirs*. As for idol worship, he gives very interesting explanation. He maintains that it is a popular practice as common people find it difficult to imagine a God who is formless and without attributes and they need some concrete object for worship and, hence they carve out some shape and see reflection of one *Ishwara* in it. What they worship, according to Jan-i-Janan, is not piece of stone but one *Ishwara* through it.

Then he gives example of sufis who need help of a master (a sheikh) to reach Allah. Without the intervention of a Sheikh, a sufi disciple cannot reach Allah. Thus, for a common Hindu an idol becomes a sheikh, an intervener. Also, Muslims go and pray at graves of sufi saints and seek their intervention.

It is important to note that Mazhar Jan-i-Janan does not take rigid position that Hindus are *kafirs* but tries to understand their religious faith and common Hindu psychology as to why they worship idols. All this is available in the letter written by Jan-i-Janan to his disciple. The letter makes very interesting reading. Also, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad has quoted several passages from *Vedas* in his volume on *Wahdat-i-Din* of *Tarjuman al-Qur'an* to show essential unity of all religions. Shah Waliyullah too, in his classic work *Hujjatl-Allah al-Balighah*, treats comprehensively the doctrine of unity of religion (*wahdat-i-din*).

Historically speaking, the *Quran* applied this term to those in Mecca who not only rejected his prophet hood and mission but also actively opposed him and persecuted him. Among them was Prophet's Uncle, Abu Lahab, who was leading the campaign against the Prophet. However, there were those who were neutral and Muslims entered into covenant with them and sought their cooperation.

Thus, the term *kafir* must be applied with great sense of responsibility and not for every non-believer in Islam. Every human being must be treated with dignity. Truth has different manifestation in different cultures.



Love God or Fear God?

There are two different approaches to worship God: for fear and greed or sheer love and devotion. Most of us ordinary people worship God either for fear of punishment or greed for reward in paradise. In sufi lore it is said once Rabia Basri, a great sufi woman of 23rd century *hijrah* (8th century AD) once was carrying bucket of water in one hand and a burning torch in the other. When people saw her they asked Oh Rabia why are you carrying this bucket of water and burning torch?

She replied I want to set paradise on fire with this torch and put out fire of hell with this bucket of water so that people do not worship Allah out of greed for paradise or fear of hell but out of pure love. Rabia loved God so much that she would say I have no time to hate Satan. My heart is filled with love of God and has no place even for hate. This is pure love and most meritorious way of worshipping God.

All saints and *Awliya Allah* (noble souls, friends of Allah) only talk of love, not of fear. From India, Rabia's counter-part is Meera. She was great devotee of God in the form of Lord Krishna whom she called by different names—Girdhar, Gopala, Krishna, Natwar and so on. Greatly loved by people even after five hundred years after her death, she com-

posed verses in common man's language like Rajasthani, Marwari, Gujrati Braj bhasha and so on. It was love of her Lord which made her fearless and she broke all royal traditions. Her devotion to her Lord made her renounce everything including her royal palace and moved around with *sadhus* and *sants*. Her royal family put tremendous pressure on her but she did not budge. Love really makes one truly fearless. Her devotional songs are sung by millions of people even today. One wonders at the intensity of love found in her poetry. It overwhelms us all.

Maulana Rum is another shining example of love and devotion. He was a great 'alim and jurist. He used to deliver sermons and had highest place in the court of king. Thousands of disciples would come to listen to him and his sermons. He would have not been known to the world despite his erudite knowledge if he had not met one day a Darvesh (mendicant) called Shams Tabriz. One day he was delivering sermon as usual and heap of books lay before him which he consulted.

This mendicant intruded and looked at the books and said what is this? Maulana, annoyed with him, said you would not know. Shams Tabriz looked at the books again and they caught fire. Maulana Rum said what is this and Tabriz said you would not know. Maulana understood that this mendicant is no ordinary person and went after him. Shams completely transformed him from an alim to a great sufi saint who renounced everything, his status in the Court, his wealth and comfortable living and became a mendicant like Shams.

He became restless in love and composed many *ghazals* (love poems) which were collected as *Diwan-i-Shams Tabriz*. And, subsequently he wrote his epic the most revered *Mathnavi* in several volumes and which came to be known as the *Quran* in Persian. It is one of the world classics. It is love, devotion to Allah that made him immortal. Like Meera he was so engrossed in love that he would say my only identity is love, not any religion, region, earth or heaven.

On the other hand those who emphasize fear of God, usually the priests and theologians, generate hatred for all others and ultimately through this fear of God they want to establish fear of their own authority in their followers. They try to induce fear in us of hell fire and how we

will be punished if we do not obey their authority. It is true the *Quran* does talk of hell fire but it is for hardened sinners who do not want to give up oppression, who are arrogant of their wealth and power.

For ordinary sinners Allah is great pardoner, reconciler and merciful. His love and mercy is ever flowing for those who repent and are ready to be good. One should seek this mercy and grace through love and devotion. It is love which completely transforms even a most evil character. Those who realize power of love, like Meera and Maulana Rum, never hesitate to renounce love of power.

It is love of power, arrogance and wealth which leads to all evils in the world and it is power of love which negates all these evils and makes this world a paradise. Now it is for us to go for love or fear. One who loves is truly fearless and indeed it is love which is God and it is God who is love.



Muhammad (PBUH) As Liberator

The birthday of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is celebrated by Muslims with great devotion and reverence. But often it is seen that devotees do not reflect on the message of the person whom they so venerate. It just becomes a tradition rather than occasion for deep reflection. Muslims also refer to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as *Muhsin-e-Insaniyyat* i.e. the benefactor of humanity but hardly care to know in what respect he became benefactor?

Muhammad, all Muslims agree, was *ummi*, i.e., did not know how to read and write and yet he ushered in great social and economic revolution that is as much useful today as it was then.

We can call him a liberator of humanity if we follow his teachings not so much from the tangled web of hadith but from the *Quran*. The *Quran* indeed was his real miracle. Firstly, he emphasized importance of knowledge (*'ilm*). This word occurs in the *Quran* more than 800 times along with its various derivatives (word *jihad*, so controversial today, occurs only 41 times).

Knowledge was so important to him that he required Muslims (both men and women) to seek it even if it was available in China, a distant land from Arabian Peninsula. Arabs who were quite averse to

knowledge, especially in written form (there were only 17 people in Mecca during the Prophet's time who could read and write), became great precursors of various sciences and even west immensely benefited from it. West discovered treasures of Greek knowledge through Arabs.

Secondly, he brought about liberation of women from bondage and gave her equal rights and recognized her individuality as a human being. He gave her equal right in marriage and made marriage a contract. He made it obligatory for her too, to seek knowledge. The cause of her bondage to men was mainly her ignorance and now seeking knowledge became her right along with obligation. Knowledge, all thinkers agree, is a real liberator.

Thirdly, Muhammad (PBUH) was greatly concerned with justice. Justice is so fundamental to Islam that it is one of the names of Allah (*Adil*). For him justice for weaker sections of society was of utmost importance. Allah, according to the *Quran*, is on the side of the weak. And it is weak (*mustad'ifin*) who shall inherit the earth and who shall be the leaders. The powerful and arrogant (*mustakbirun*) shall be doomed.

Fourthly, for all the actions he made individuals responsible. The *Quran* also said that each individual carried his/her burden and no one else carried it for others. For that time, it was a very revolutionary declaration. The *Quran* made reward or punishment individual-centric, not tribe centered. This freed individual from the burden of tribal customs and superstitions. Collectivity is important but not at the cost of individual.

Fifthly, Muhammad also gave individuals their rights and dignity along with responsibility. And human dignity was not circumscribed by any religion, tribe or ethnicity but included all children of Adam (*kar-ramna bani Adam*). It indeed was a revolutionary declaration of human rights which preceded UN Charter of Human rights by more than 1400 years. Also, the Prophet said entire creation is the family of Allah.

Sixthly, He gave concept of *Bayt al-maal* i.e. treasury to which all Muslims will contribute according to one's income. We can describe it as concept of welfare state in modern terms. *Zakat* was not a tax for the luxury of the rulers, as used to happen in those days. It was strictly

meant for the welfare of the weaker sections, orphans, widows, poor, travelers and liberation of prisoners and slaves. It was unprecedented levy in those days.

He even declared land is only for tillers thus bringing down the oppressive and exploitative feudal system. Unfortunately within few decades of his death, Muslim rulers established great empire based on exploitative system again. However, all this would appear unbelievable for many non-Muslims. Why? Muslims often paid verbal tributes to the Prophet (PBUH) but did just the opposite.

What is the condition of women in Muslim countries? Are Muslim states welfare states at all? Do their rulers live simple life like the Prophet did? Do they respect individual rights and human dignity? Do they practice justice at all costs? Do they respect human life as sacred creation of Allah? Answers may not be in affirmative? Muslims have to reflect seriously on their failure and recommit themselves to the Quranic value system.



From Jihad to Ijtihad

From early 21st century, jihad has become a notorious word, thanks to attack on New York Twin Towers and the subsequent campaign run by the western media. It has now overwhelmed certain parts of Islamic world like Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq etc. It seems violence is getting out of control and it is Muslims in these three regions who are being targeted.

The Ulema have repeatedly condemned the suicide bombing and terrorism as un-Islamic. Several consultations and conferences organised by Ulema from different parts of the Islamic world have made it quite clear that such mindless violence has no place in Islam. Recently, prominent Ulema from several Islamic countries from Senegal to Indonesia gathered at Mardin, Turkey and unanimously rejected the medieval *fatwa* known as Mardin *fatwa* issued by Ibn Taymiyyah saying it has no place in the contemporary globalized world which respects faith and civil rights.

Mardin fatwa was quoted by Osama bin Laden to justify his terrorist attacks. Later, the highest religious Saudi body denounced terrorism. This body issued a *fatwa* denouncing all acts of terrorism and even criminalized its financing. Those who finance such acts are also part of the crime. Thus the terrorists cannot find any justification in Islam for

their acts. Their very support base has been knocked off.

One can hardly expect much impact of such *fatwas* on terrorists themselves but would certainly help weaning away those Muslims from terrorists who justify such attacks on the basis of their religion. That is also not small achievements.

Our attention must shift now from jihad to *ijtihad*. *Ijtihad* which means to strive intellectually utmost to comprehend problems facing the Islamic world and find their solution in keeping with basic principles and values enshrined in the *Quran*. *Ijtihad* has been called by many scholars of Islam including Allama Iqbal as the dynamic spirit of Islam and Islamic law.

It is interesting to note that *ijtihad* was very much a living process in early Islam and its gates were shut, many scholars maintain, around sack of Baghdad in 1258 by the Mongol hordes. Ironically it is half a century later that Ibn Taymiyyah, defining his own Hanbali school of Law that he issued his *fatwa* on jihad. Thus gates of *ijtihad* were closed and jihad was justified.

Now that jihad (its new incarnation terrorism) is being denounced by all prominent Ulama of the Islamic world, it is time that gates of *ijtihad* be opened and a fresh approach be developed for many legal and other problems facing the Islamic world. Blind imitation and stagnation have become the bane of the Islamic world today. While breath-taking changes are taking place in the world around us, we continue to imitate what has been inebriated by us in the religion-legal field.

We are unable to think afresh and derive inspiration from the *Quran*. We keep on quoting only certain imams and medieval authorities which have become more sacrosanct for us than the basic book of guidance that is the *Quran*. I propose few basic steps in developing a fresh approach and throwing open gates of *ijtihad*.

Firstly, few Ulama and Muslim intellectuals (and there are many Ulama who have been trained in traditional Islamic literature *tafsir*, hadith and jurisprudence who feel need for change) must take courage in both hands and come forward to develop fresh approach defying powerful vested interests.

Secondly, we must transcend all existing *madhahib* (schools of law) and develop a unified Islamic law applicable to all Muslims which will also give greater meaning to otherwise hollow slogan of Islamic unity. It does not mean that we reject all provisions of existing schools of law but what it means that we must select from all these schools what is best in them and what is in keeping with the Quranic principles and values.

Thirdly, a new *ijma'* (consensus) will have to be developed and why not? If the Ulama of first three centuries of Islam could do it why not us? However, their *ijma'* was limited to their own school. Today in the globalized world a much wider consensus across all these schools will have to be developed and modern means of information and communication technology have made it much easier.

In medieval Islamic jurisprudence they used *qiyas* (analogical reasoning) and *ijma'* and both were human instruments to solve their legal problems. Why can't we develop new analogies on global scale? What passes on as divine in Shari'ah today is nothing but local culturally embedded elements, particularly of the local Arab and Persian cultures. We must transcend all these elements and like the *Quran* develop universal outlook. Islamic law will become more modern than modern itself and this universality will give it global acceptance.



A Different Jihad

The word jihad's literal meaning is to strive, for any thing good including striving for peace or for welfare humanity. If the Quranic verses in the *Quran* are read with its oft repeated command that the believers should enforce what is good and forbid what is evil (*yamurun b'il ma'ruf wa ynahuna 'anil munkar*) the whole meaning of jihad assumes a new significance.

All those who are serving humanity in different ways by promoting a morally clean and non-corrupt society, are real *mujahids*. It is for this reason that the word jihad was interpreted differently by different sections of society. For rulers and political class it meant war and conquests to expand Islamic rule, for sufis it meant to conquer ones own desires and greed and for theological class it meant efforts to enforce Shari'ah and to mould one's behaviour within Shari'ah limits (*hudud*). And for Osama bin Laden it meant again very different thing and he used it for retaliation against US and gave rise to what is totally unacceptable phenomenon of terrorism. However, when the political class in medieval ages used jihad for territorial conquests, it was how the rulers expanded their regimes in those days. Even Ibn Taymiyyah had some justification for issuing *fatwa* for jihad after Mongol hordes sacked Baghdad.

But what Osama did was very different. It is neither an acceptable way in the contemporary world nor does he belong to a political or ruling class. No head of the Islamic state has approved of what Osama did nor has any army of a Muslim country invaded any other non-Muslim country. Usama is neither head of any country nor has he backing of any regular Muslim army. Thus his jihad has neither scriptural backing, nor political nor of Ulama. It is nothing more than personal and hence totally unacceptable.

Coming back to root meaning of jihad, i.e., to strive for good of the society and for enhancing welfare of humanity as a whole, today one of the best ways of waging jihad would be to struggle and strive for saving our earth and its environment. This form of jihad has multiple levels of meaning of jihad: Firstly, it is most *ma'ruf* (desirable and most acceptable) activity; secondly, it also has the sense in which the sufis used it, i.e., controlling one's desire and greed and exercising self control on one's inner self and, fourthly, it is also in keeping with the Prophet's *sunna* as there are repeated commands of the Prophet to protect trees and crops and respect Allah's creation.

Also, the very opening chapter of the *Qur'an Surah Fatihah* describes Allah as *Rabb al-'Alamin* (i.e. Lord of the Universe) and the word *rabb* in Arabic means to look after carefully and take some thing through various stages of perfection. And if Allah is *Rabb* of entire universe and we worship him it is our duty to strive to look after it carefully and not to destroy it otherwise our worship of the Lord has no meaning, if we do not respect His creation.

Also, we must realize that global warming is the result of our greed for consumption. We are plundering the precious resources of earth for our greed. It is high time we realize the dangerous consequences of our reckless consumption and wage a jihad against our own greed as Sufis did. As political class has greed for more territories and do not care for shedding blood of innocent people, we as citizens in a modern capitalist consumer society, are plundering the scarce resources of the earth and do not care for the consequences and are making lives of our future generations difficult to live.

So, as Muslims (which means surrendering to the will of Allah) and as *mu'min* (which means believer in the values enshrined in the *Quran* and respecting the creation of Allah) we must strive, i.e., wage jihad against all those who indulge in needless consumption and destroy our earth.

This form of jihad has to be both individual and collective: Individual in as much as we have first to struggle against our own greed and reduce our consumption to environmentally acceptable levels and collectively in as much as we have to make efforts to bring down consumption levels of entire world to acceptable levels through constant awareness campaigns and building pressures on the ruling classes and especially developed nations of the west whose consumptions of natural resources are far more than what is warranted by their population.

Many Arab countries have the rich oil resources and when used generates high carbon emissions which leads to global warming. When the Prophet was asked what the best form of jihad is, he replied telling the truth in the face of a tyrant ruler. Can these Arab rulers tell the truth to western and other nations, especially to US to reduce their oil consumption and face the consequences? It would be a great jihad.



Martyrdom and Houris

A top police officer wrote to me what is the Quranic basis of the belief that those who became martyr will go to paradise and will be awarded with 70 *houris* (hours). This becomes an incentive for terrorists to die in the 'cause of Islam'.

This belief has no foundation in the Quranic text. It is nothing more than a popular belief and is being used by vested interests. It is, therefore, necessary to explore what the *Quran* has to say. First of all, one must understand what is *shahadat* (martyrdom) in *Quran*. Of course, the literal meaning of *shahadat* is to witness, to acknowledge, bearing testimony, to be present and also martyrdom.

The question is why *shahadat* is used for martyrdom whereas literally it means to witness and to be present. One bears testimony to something which one witnesses and this witnessing is not only in physical sense i.e. witnessing with eye but also in psychological and spiritual sense i.e. to have a vision, vision of future and it is for this vision that one lays down one's life.

Thus, one virtually witnesses what one is dying for and it is in this sense that *shahadat* becomes martyrdom and it is in this sense that the *Quran* says that a martyr never dies and lives for ever. Thus, martyr-

dom in the *Quran* is a very noble act of sacrifice of one's life and puts a martyr along with *siddiqin wa al-salihin*, i.e., upholders of truth and doers of good deeds. It is not an act of killing but rather getting killed to uphold truth.

Thus, martyrdom in the *Quran* is to realize and witness oneself virtually what one wants to bring about in this world and to unhesitatingly give one's life for the purpose. The *Quran* divides knowledge of something in two categories, namely, knowledge of certainty (*'ilm al-yaqin*) and eye of certainty (*'ayn al-yaqin*), i.e., witnessing something with one's own eye and not only with knowledge of something and the martyr falls into second category i.e. he witnesses it with his own eyes and hence a *shahid*.

This act of *shahadat* would never involve killing but of sacrificing and if at all any killing it would be in defense and there is no question of killing indiscriminately as often terrorists do. Terrorism is killing to destroy whereas *shahadat* is an act of laying down life to construct a truthful and just order and many of the Prophet's companions laid down their lives to bring about this truthful and just order. Now coming to the question of *hur* which, according to the popular belief, has been promised for martyrs in the *Quran*, let it be known that in the first place *jannah* i.e. paradise (*jannah* literally means a land covered and hidden with trees and intense greenery) to all those who are *salih* (those who bring about welfare of others) and doers of good deeds (*'amal saih*).

The relevant verse on *hur* is as follows: "Immortal youths will wait upon them with goblets, and ewers, and cups filled with water from unsullied springs by which their minds will not be clouded and which will not make them drunk; and with fruit of any kind that they may desire. And (with them will be their) companions pure, (*hur al-'in*), most beautiful of eye like unto pearls (still) hidden in their shells. And this will be reward for what they did (in life) (and not only for martyrs). No empty talk they will hear there, nor any call to sin but only the tiding of inner soundness and peace. (56:22-26)

This is most sublime description of *jannah* which all doers of good will achieve and *hur* is not as often believed feminine gender but

it includes both genders. Its literal meaning is intense whiteness of the eye balls and lustrous black of the *iris* (*Qamus*). *Hawar* indicates simply whiteness or moral purity and it was in this sense that Christ's companions are referred to as *hawwariyun* i.e. morally pure beings.

In this whole discourse on *hur*, there is no reference to sex or lust but of richness of soul and moral purity. In fact, *hur* is plural of both *ahwar* (masculine) and *hawra'* (feminine). Thus, *hur* in the *Quran* would mean morally pure men and women who will be companions of those who enter paradise. And, the *Quran* also says that there will be no empty talk (*laghw*) and one will hear only peace and peace (*salaman salaman*) i.e. eternal peace of soul.

Thus, neither *hur* are women nor seventy in number. This sublime description of *jannat* (paradise) is spiritual in nature and those who resist all temptations and do nothing but good and are truthful and just would bring about such an order of eternal peace in this and the other world.



What it Means to be Religious

There is great misunderstanding both among believers and non-believers about what it means to be religious. For most of the believers religion is a set of rituals, appearance or even a set of dogmas and superstitions whereas for non-believers (rationalists and empiricists) it is nothing but irrational beliefs, dogmas and superstitions which impede human progress and also cause violence and destruction. Even terrorism, they believe, is due to religion.

Then the question arises why millions of people believe in religion? The rationalists maintain it is because of illiteracy and irrationalism. But then many highly educated people also believe in religion so it is not easy to assign it to illiteracy alone. And all those who believe in religion are not superstitious. Many of them are quite rational and even accept science and scientific methods without reservation. Sir Syed even maintained that there cannot be contradiction between word of God (*Quran*) and work of God (Nature and laws of nature). Moreover, many great scientists have been believers in religion).

The question that arises is what it means to be truly religious? For ordinary people (including educated ones), religion is mixed bag. It comprises dogmas, customs and traditions which come from our culture

rather than religion. Religion, once it becomes a powerful establishment, represents more of vested interests than religious teachings and values. It loses its dynamism. Interests become supreme rather than real spirit of religion. Also, dogmas become more central than change as change for many believers bring a sense of insecurity and uncertainty whereas they believe in religion to ensure inner security. Also, dogmas ensure constancy of leadership as any change brings shift from orthodox leadership to modern leadership and orthodox leadership is better able to manipulate and control peoples for most people religion is a matter of belief rather than thinking and reflection.

In fact, in its higher reaches religion is neither superstition, nor dogma and mere rituals. Religion poses problems when it is made to serve different human needs and interests. As water finds its own level, religion too finds its own level in unevenly developed society. For those who remain illiterate and backward it becomes a source of solace which is better served by dogmas and superstitions rather than thinking and change.

However, for highly educated and developed sections of society, it becomes a source of values and philosophy and invites them to reflect on God's creation. The *Quran* repeatedly says why don't you think? Why don't you reflect on God's creation? The *Quran*, if understood in its proper spirit creates intellectual ferment and dynamism rather than stagnation and dogmas. Dogmas were created by theologians and they put basic emphasis on these dogmas as they serve their needs and interests.

Also, for many, religion is ritual-oriented rather than value-oriented. By performing certain rituals and maintaining certain appearances they think they are religious. For many others, religion is a source of values rather than rituals. Rituals serve a sense of community and identity and often become mechanical exercises and hardly inspire any inner change.

Then how should one look at religion and being religious? There are five most fundamental qualities for being truly religious without which one can claim to be religious but can hardly qualify to be one. These five fundamental qualities are: (1) constant quest for truth; (2) to be humble; (3) to be compassionate and (4) to be anti-establishment (5) to be transcendent in vision.

We would like to throw some light on these essential qualities to be religious. In every religious tradition, God's name is truth. In Islamic tradition one of Allah's name is *Haq* i.e. Truth. Without being truthful and engaged in constant quest for truth one can hardly be religious. All great founders of religion from Buddha to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) spent years of their lives in quest for truth and got inspiration to understand truth. It should be mission of one's life to search for truth, in all its manifestations. Also, truth does not have one form and one manifestation. It is not stagnant or a dogma but dynamic and intellectually challenging.

Along with constant quest for truth humility is required. Any sense of truth being any ones monopoly leads to sense of arrogance and destroys the very quality of truth. That is why the *Quran* says that all previous prophets came with truth and requires Muslims not to distinguish between one and the other prophets, those who do so are not true believers. All prophets and great religious thinkers were committed to quest for truth. Also, the *Quran* maintains that Allah has created diversity, not uniformity so that one could understand different forms of truth without leading to arrogance. Anyone engaged in quest for truth has to have a quality of humility.

The *Quran* strongly denounces *mustakbitin* (the powerful and arrogant). Most of the prophets mentioned in the *Quran* were of humble origin. Third important quality for being truly religious is being compassionate i.e. being sensitive to others suffering. Anyone who is not compassionate cannot be a true human being, let alone religious. Allah's name in the *Quran* is Compassionate Merciful (*Al-Rahman al-Rahim*) and Prophet Muhammad has been described as Mercy of the Worlds (*Rahmatan li-Al'alamin*). Any Muslim who is not compassionate would never be a true Muslim.

Similarly, a true religious person has to be anti-establishment as most of the establishments represent vested interests rather than values. Some people try to control these establishments and do anything to retain their control over it. They tend to become authoritarian and try to eliminate their rivals. Also, a truly religious person would always be

inspired by future vision rather than what is given. He would be engaged in creating new world as what is given is never perfect. Those who have these qualities would indeed be really truly religious people.



Is God Dead?

It is Nietzsche, a German philosopher, who said 'God is dead' but one does not know what exactly he meant by this statement. Was he rationalist like most other rationalists in the 19th century who turned atheists thinking that the ultimate mystery of the universe and its creation would soon be discovered. New scientific discoveries made them hopeful. However, that hope remains still a hope and has still not become a reality. Or did he say this in the sense that moral values were dead and God represented ultimate values of justice, compassion, love and so on?

Or did he mean that we no more need any values, much less its source God and what ultimately matters is power, not morality. Nietzsche after all did believe in a superior race who had the right to rule. It is said that he provided inspiration to Nazis who also believed in a superior race of Aryans. It is interesting to note that Iqbal was also attracted by Nietzsche's doctrine of power, though not of superior race which did not have to follow any morals. Iqbal believed in power with morality as a Muslim and hence he described Nietzsche as one whose mind was *kafir* (non-believer) but heart a believer.

Whatever Nietzsche meant the question remains 'Is God dead?' The answer in my opinion is definite 'no'. The rationalists' hope that ultimate

mystery of the universe would be solved through scientific discoveries has proved to be more of illusion than reality. Every new discovery brings greater sense of mystery. These discoveries increase our sense of awe and wonderment. It is interesting to note that the word Allah comes from Hebrew 'iloh' which carries the sense of wonderment or awe.

Recently, well known scientist Stephen Hawkins too expressed his doubt about creator of this universe and many believers in God tried to refute his statement. Hawkins said there may be God in the universal sense of energy and power, but certainly there is no personal God who answers personal prayers. To deny personal God is not to deny universal God, he said. Even Voltaire, the noted French philosopher and firm believer in Catholic Christianity, did not believe in personal God. One Sunday when he came out of the church, he saw an old woman praying to God to remove illness of her bird. Voltaire commented "Madam, God has more serious work to run this universe than to attend to your bird."

Is God then dead in the sense of ultimate values whose source is God? Yes, in this sense there is truth in the statement. In a sway, the ruling classes have always been beyond any sense of morality. They do invoke religion in formal sense and woo religious priests making them part of their oppressive establishment and it was in this sense that Marx criticized the role of religion and priesthood. However, in colonial days when Nietzsche was thinking and writing, there was sharp decline in morality of colonial masters. What motivated them was their greed and naked loot.

However, colonial loot pales into insignificance if we take the loot being perpetrated by globalized economy and destructive wars being waged by global powers with the help of most modern weapons, which with the pressing of a button hundreds of miles away can destroy thousands of people and all this for monopolizing oil and other resources. Even the colonial masters would turn in their graves at such ruthless killings and sharp decline in moral standards and values.

The interesting thing is that more such naked loot and sharp decline in moral values take place more these ruling elites need the concept of formal God and religion. Thus, during George Bush's time

it was rightwing Christianity which was ruling the roost. Along with the army which invaded Iraq, Bush had sent text of Christian prayers for every week day which soldiers were asked to recite. The Zionists are also extreme fanatics in religious matters. More they act immorally more they invoke extremes of formal religion.

It is hardly any different as far as Muslim extremists are concerned. The terrorists outfits like *Al-Qaeda* and Taliban have hardly any respect for human dignity and life, and human life, according to all religious scriptures, are highest and the best creation of God. These terrorists, for their own political designs, have killed thousands of innocent people. They too need to invoke religion for their misdeeds and more they kill more they need to invoke God and religion.

The word jihad has been repeatedly invoked by *Al-Qaeda* and Taliban to mislead Muslims. Jihad in the *Quran* is a noble concept and cannot be practised without rigorous standards of morality and ethical responsibility. Now these Taliban are throwing bombs at the highly revered mausoleums of sufi saints who devoted their lives for truth, morality and peace and had highest respect for human life. And all this in the name of the religion.

Thus, if Nietzsche said God is dead, he was very right. And as true believers, it becomes our duty to fight against such gross misuse and revive true spirit of religion. It is God in the sense of ultimate moral values who can be savior of humanity. That would be real jihad which all believers must wage as their obligation and across all religious denominations.



Inter-religious Dialogue: Its Significance and Rules

In our pluralistic globalized world, inter-religious, inter-cultural or inter-civilization dialogue has become very crucial. There are serious misconceptions about communities other than our own; not only this, there are serious misconceptions about other sects in the same religious community. Thus, even intra-faith dialogue also becomes necessary. The whole world has become multi-cultural and it is all the more necessary in a democratic system.

In democracy, all citizens, whatever their culture, religion or ethnicity, enjoy equal rights and such misconceptions about the 'other' come in the way of other's rights. In fact, in democratic pluralist society, three Ds—democracy, diversity and dialogue—become necessary. Diversity strengthens democracy and dialogue strengthens diversity. Many tend to think that uniformity is necessary for democracy. It is a mistaken notion. In fact, uniformity can lead to dictatorship and diversity can become a powerful force against dictatorship. So diversity and dialogue become important.

Also, it is important in a democracy to accept the 'other' as the 'other' is and no one has right to prescribe how the other should be which we often do, especially for minorities be they cultural or religious. It is often demanded of religious and cultural minorities that they should

become part of 'mainstream' culture and not maintain their distinctive features. All minorities come under the pressure. And it is religious or cultural majorities who define what 'mainstream' culture is.

Often, cultural or religious majorities also become political majority which is against the spirit of democracy. One should not confuse between cultural or religious majority and political majority. Both are different. It is sheer arrogance on the part of religious and cultural majorities to equate it with political majority. It is happening even in advanced western democracies and even in these democracies minorities are coming under severe pressure to conform to majority cultural norms.

It is through inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue that one can understand the distinctive features of other's religion or culture. The basic thing about such dialogue is the capacity to listen to the other than to speak. Listening is much more important in dialogue than speaking. There should be proper balance between speaking and listening, otherwise we can never understand the other. Better if we minimize speaking and let the other speak.

There is one more tendency in dialogue which tends to deprive the dialogue of its importance, i.e., to bring out best features of one's own tradition and point out worst from that of the other. In fact, one should be very honest and objective in dialogue situation. One should bring out critically what are weaknesses of one's own tradition and readily appreciate what is best in other's tradition. Of course, the best way to appreciate the other is to be participant-observer which many sufi saints did in Indian subcontinent by adopting local culture and language. Thus, they became closer to the masses of people.

Also, one should not only quote scriptures but also evaluate critically one's historical practices. What is written in scripture is often quite different from historical practices. We often take best from our scriptures and worst from the other's historical practices and then tend to 'prove' our superiority. In fact, it is downright dishonest comparisons. Scripture should be compared with scripture and historical practices should be compared with historical practices. What scripture prescribes is ideal and historical practice depends on various factors like interpretation,

pre-existing cultural traditions, selfish interests of practitioners and so on. For example, what is stated in the *Quran* about women's rights was never practised in Islamic societies as these societies were patriarchal in structure and their cultural traditions could not accept gender equality and hence they found out various ways of violating gender equality. Thus, it would be unfair to blame gender oppression in Muslim societies to the *Quran*.

In all inter-faith dialogues, the idea should be to understand the other rather than convert the other to one's own point of view. The inter-faith dialogue should be carried out in the spirit of acceptance of the other rather than rejection of the other and for this it is necessary that both sides should be well rooted in their respective traditions. Deep conviction is necessary in one's own tradition before one is able to appreciate the conviction of the other.

However, this does not mean one should be rigid about one's own position or that of the other. Tolerance and respect for the other is the very basis of dialogue. One should not condemn the other even if one cannot accept the others point of view or practice. A good example is of Mazhar Jan-i-Janan respecting the Hindu tradition of idol worshiping and its justification from Hindu's viewpoint though he himself would not do so.

Intra-faith dialogue is also very important for co-existence of various sects of the same religion especially if the sect happens to be in minority. Many Sunni friends believed few decades ago that one should not drink water in any Khoja's house as they spit in the glass of water before giving it to any Sunni Muslim. In pre-independence days, there were riots between Bohras and Sunni Muslims in Patan when a Sunni boy was found missing and it was believed that he was slaughtered and his blood mixed with rice by Bohras and ate it. It was on Jinnah's intervention that riots stopped and peace established.

Thus, both inter-religious and intra-religious dialogue is very important and necessary for peaceful co-existence.



Who is a Progressive Muslim?

In one of the discussions I came across a debate as to who is a progressive Muslim and what are the characteristics of a progressive Muslim. I had the following to say.

A progressive Muslim is one who is firmly grounded in the Quranic values of truth (*haq*), justice (*'adl*), compassion (*rahmah*), wisdom (*hikmah*) and does service to others rather than being served by others. A progressive Muslim does not believe in sectarian Islam (Sunni or Shi'ah or Isma'ili or Deobandi or Barelvi or Ahl-e-hadith or Salafi Islam) but rises above all these sects and gives importance to the *Quran* above everything else.

A progressive Islam not only does not adopt sectarian approach but is respectful of the entire humanity as per the *Quran* (17:70). He leaves mutual differences, ideological and theological, to Allah and does not condemn anyone who differs as *kafirs*. It only widens differences and intensifies conflict. A progressive Muslim uses, as per the *Quran*, wisdom (*hikmah*) and godly words (*maw'izat al-Hasanah*) in discussion and leaves rest to Allah. He does not try to be judgemental.

A progressive Muslim is least influenced by personal prejudices and always gives more importance to knowledge than his own opinion. The

Quran condemns prejudiced opinion (*zan*) and promotes knowledge (*ilm*). Also, openness of mind is a seminal quality and avoids arrogance born more out of ignorance than knowledge. Those who have little knowledge are more arrogant and those who have greater degree of knowledge know limitations of their own knowledge and hence tend to be humble.

A progressive Muslim first of all studies his/her own religion in depth and tries to understand, as objectively as possible, the causes of differences between different religions and shows full respect for others' beliefs. It is those who do not know their own religion, much less those of others, who condemn religion of others. The *Quran* says, "And abuse not those whom they call upon besides Allah lest, exceeding the limits they abuse Allah through ignorance." (6:109). Further, in this verse, Allah says, "Thus to everyone people have made their deeds fair-seeming; then to their Lord is their return so He will inform them of what they did." Thus, ultimately it is Allah who will judge. We human beings judge more out of ignorance and arrogance of our ego than knowledge and selflessness.

The key words in this verse are that for every people we made their deeds fair-seeming to them. Then who are we human beings to condemn others' beliefs and deeds. Let then Allah alone judge who is right and who is wrong.

Also a progressive Muslim celebrates diversity. Diversity is creation of Allah and if Allah desired He could have made entire humanity one community (5:48). The *Quran* also says, "And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your tongues and colours. Surely, there are signs in this for the learned." Thus, a progressive Muslim will never have any prejudice against any language or colour of skin or any colour for that matter as these are all creations of Allah.

Also, both men and women are creation of Allah and both need to be treated with same degree of dignity. Allah has created all species in couples and it is necessary for survival of all species. No species will survive unless it is created in couples. Thus, feminine of the couple is as important as masculine and in human beings both gender must be treated equally. Moreover, gender is social and cultural construct.

A progressive Muslim knows this very well and treats both men and women with equal dignity and believes in giving equal rights to both. And in today's context gender equality becomes a crucial test for a progressive Muslim. Female servitude was purely feudal cultural creation and Islam opposed it and pronounced the doctrine of gender equality in clear terms (2:228). A progressive Muslim knows that certain Shari'ah provisions establishing male superiority were in response to cultural needs of a patriarchal society than based on the *Quran* and hadith.

Thus, a progressive Muslim will give more importance to Quranic pronouncements of gender equality than feudal female servitude and would not consider these (provisions of Shari'ah as eternal and unalterable). A progressive Muslim, therefore, would reconstruct Shari'ah and accord equal rights to women who are also believers. One believer cannot be superior to another believer. Male superiority is a human construct and human construct cannot override divine injunction. Also, functional differences i.e., bearing children should not result in distinction of superior and inferior.

A progressive Muslim would accord seeking knowledge highest priority as knowledge has been equated with light (*nor*) and ignorance to darkness (*zulmat*) and Allah brings out believers from darkness to light. And, the Prophet (PBUH) has said that a moment's reflection is more important than whole night's worship (*'ibadat*). Thus, knowledge has priority over worship.



Session – III

Islam and Different Issues

Quest of Truth or Power?

There is a lot of confusion worldwide about the significance of religion in one's life. For instance, does religion urge its followers to engage in a quest for truth or power? Much of the middle class uses religion as an instrument of power instead of seeing it as an instrument in the quest for truth.

If religion is meant for the latter, it becomes a boon for humanity. Whenever it has been used as a tool of power, it has brought war and bloodshed.

All religions have put great emphasis on truth. The *Quran* also maintains that all prophets conveyed the truth from Allah and hence it accepts the validity of earlier prophets' messages, though followers may have distorted it later. In the *Quran*, one of Allah's names is *Haq* (truth). All prophets, including the Prophet of Islam (PBUH), were greatly disturbed by the prevailing conditions, especially the moral degradation of the rich and the powerful and their oppression. Through the power of truth, they challenged the oppressors.

Opposition to Prophet Mohammad came mainly from the rich and the powerful of Mecca, who were disturbed by the message of truth, justice and peace and so began to persecute him. The Prophet and his fol-

lowers faced oppression from these quarters but they remained steadfast and determined. They never gave in, and made sacrifices for establishing a just and peaceful society, where all could live in freedom and dignity, believing in one God and fearing none but Him. The Prophet and his followers were seriously engaged against injustice in society.

It is for this reason the *Quran* condemns the accumulation of wealth (chapter 104) and shows sympathises with orphans, widows, the poor (*masakin*) and other weaker sections of society (chapter 107). Social dynamics in the *Quran* consists of a constant struggle between the oppressed and the oppressor (*mustad'ifun* and *mustakbirun*) and Allah's sympathies are of course with *mustad'ifun* (28:5).

Thus, it becomes clear that Islam and the Holy Prophet were never in search for power but in a constant quest for the truth. It is also a fact that the quest for truth makes a person humble while the quest for power makes him arrogant. A society dominated by the urge for truth will never become a cause of conflict, but a people in search for power can become despots in extreme cases.

Sufis in Islamic history also represent the quest for truth whereas sultans and kings represent that for power. While sufis attracted the masses and brought about inner peace to many, kings and sultans brought wars and bloodshed. One dynasty of rulers fought the other. Sons fought against fathers, and brother against brother.

Also, the ulama that did not align themselves with rulers — like Imam Abu Hanifa and several others — never became an instrument of consolidating a ruler's power. The Abbasids, for their own reasons, upheld the doctrine of creation of the *Quran* (mainly for support from the *mu'tazilites*) but the ulama like Abu Hanifa refused to endorse the doctrine and were flogged. Imam Hanifa even refused to become the chief *qazi* (judge), fearing he might be required to support the rulers' political doctrines, which may not have conformed to the teachings of Islam.

Such ulama tried to uphold the truth (*haq*) because they understood Islam as a quest for truth, not for power. The sultans shed much blood and even their governors like Hajjaj bin Yusuf were notorious for slaughter. He is reported to have killed some 100,000 Muslims and imprisoned

more than that number; he also kept some 50,000 women in prison. Yazid got the grandson of the Prophet martyred for the sake of power, whereas the imam remained steadfast in his conviction of the truth. Yazid was on the side of power and Hussain on the side of truth.

Talking of the modern times, religion has been often misused in the quest for power by dictators, *sheikhs* and kings. Even Islamisation became a political tool in the quest for power for rulers like Zia ul Haq. No dictator who talked of Islamisation ever made an effort to usher in a just society, free of oppression and exploitation of the weak, which was the goal of Islam.

The dearest thing to the Prophet of Islam was justice, not power. Even before he became the Prophet, he had set up *hilf al fidul* (society of the meritorious) to do justice to those who were wronged by the unscrupulous. It was truth and justice, not power, that the Prophet strived for. That was real jihad; one that never sought power. Thus the establishment of *haq*, not *iqtidar* (power), is the goal of religion.



Post-modernism and Islam

What is the relation between Islam and post-modernism? Earlier, we used to talk of Islam and modernism and now we talk of Islam and post-modernism.

First, let us understand the difference between modernism and post-modernism. Modernism, which ruled the roost until the early 1950s, was characterised by hegemony of reason. Modernism rejected anything which was not in conformity with reason.

Modernism was, in a way, quite intolerant of forces of tradition or even anything supra-rational, let alone irrational. It was for this reason that Freud's theory of the subconscious or unconscious was also ridiculed by modernists. It was not deemed to be in conformity with reason. Even Marxists rejected Freud and his explanation of deeper sources of human behaviour. Naturally they also rejected religion as something irrational. Thus, modernism was as intolerant of anything non-modern as one religion is said to be of another.

Europe throughout the 19th century was characterised by modernism and Asia and Africa were looked down upon by the Europeans as anti-modern and irrational. The 19th century was thus the century of modernism and European hegemony. It was in the early 1950s and

'60s that new trends began to emerge and post-modernism began to be theorised by academics and social scientists.

In post-modernism, reason lost its hegemony and supra-rational forces came to be accepted. Post-modernism is mainly characterised by pluralism, be it cultural, religious or literary. Europe and North America became multi-cultural and multi-religious societies due to the migration of people from the Western powers' former African and Asian colonies.

Also, it was during this phase that religion also found a respectable place again in western society. In other words, religion came to be re-appropriated. Thus, post-modernism, unlike modernism, is not hegemonic and is tolerant of other cultures; its main characteristic is pluralism. Now let us explore the relation between Islam and post-modernism.

Islam believes in religious and cultural pluralism and, while accepting importance of reason, it also accepts supra-rational forces. According to the *Quran*, Allah has created several religions and cultures though he could have created only one, if He so desired (5:48). Thus, pluralism is accepted by the *Quran*.

According to the *Quran*, the world has been created in its plurality, not only in matters of religion but also by way of ethnicity, nations and tribes. These have been described as the signs of Allah (30:22). About national and tribal plurality, one only need see Surah 49, verse 13.

The *Quran* stresses pluralism to such an extent that even when one is convinced that others' gods are false, it stops believers from abusing them. The *Quran* says, "And abuse not those whom they call upon besides Allah, lest, exceeding the limits they abuse Allah through ignorance." Further, it says: "Thus to every people have. We made their deeds fair-seeming..." (6:109)

Here, it is a the Quranic injunction not to say bad words about others' religion(s) because to every people their religion looks true and valid. The *Quran* even says that in every place of worship Allah is remembered and hence it should be respected. The holy book says, "And if Allah did not repel some people by others, cloisters and churches and synagogues and mosques in which Allah's name is much remembered, would have been pulled down." (22:40).

There is no place for inter-religious conflict in Islam. The *Quran* also subscribes to the doctrine of what Shah Waliullah and Maulana Azad called the *wahdat-i-din*, that is, unity of religion, which means all religions are same in essence and in their core teachings. Both the eminent theologians have thrown detailed light on this question in their respective writings.

As far as multiculturalism is concerned, the West accepted it only in the latter part of the 20th century. The West had otherwise long been a mono-religious and mono-cultural society because the Church had rejected the validity of all other religions except Christianity. It's now that the Church believes in inter-religious dialogue and has issued instructions to Christian organisations to that effect. The *Quran* had accepted all Biblical prophets during the revelation itself.

Islam accepted multiculturalism too by saying that all believers are one: the *ummah*, regardless of their ethnicity, language, tribe or nationality. It also admonished believers for discriminating between Arabs and non-Arabs, as Arabs were very proud of their ethnic origin. Islam spread far and wide among peoples of different cultures and even the *Shari'ah* respected the '*adat* (customs) of different people. Local customs and traditions were integrated with *Shari'ah* formulations from the earliest time.

Thus, it will be seen that Islamic teachings anticipated what came to be called post-modernism today. The most essential thing is tolerance for diversity and for those who appear different from Muslims. Being different should not mean being inferior, superior or hostile to the other. We must project Islam in the right spirit, emphasising the practice of tolerance, it so ardently advocates to the faithful.



Is Islam Capitalist or Socialist?

A few years ago, a press conference was held in Mumbai by some Muslim organizations and theologians who claimed that Islam was against capitalism and imperialism, and that they would launch a campaign against both. It is indeed a crude attempt to compare or contrast modern political ideologies with Islam which originated in the 7th century Arabia.

Islam has its central values like truth, justice and equality, which very favourably compare with modern concept of human rights, human dignity and social justice. But modern economic conditions and political ideologies have their own origin which has nothing to do with the economic conditions prevailing after Islam appeared on the Arabian scene.

During my visit to Cairo a few decades ago, I found a book *Al-Yamin wa Al-Yasar fi'l Islam* (The Right and Left in Islam). I found this book quite interesting as the entire discussion revolved around the then prevailing conditions and how the first four rightly guided Caliphs followed different economic policies, which had a deep impact on social conditions in the Islamic world.

Another book in this respect was published in 1977 by Prof

Khurshid Ahmed Fariq, who taught Arabic in Jamia Millia Islamia in Delhi. The title of the book is *Khilafat-e-Rashida ka Iqtisadi Jai'za* — economic survey of the period of the Rightly Guided Caliphs. This book also discussed the economic conditions then prevailing without any reference to modern ideologies.

Undoubtedly, Islam tried to create a just society in every respect. It was this core value of justice in Islam, which made WC Smith, a noted Islamic scholar who taught at Government College Lahore in the 1930s, state that Islam was the first systematic attempt in human history to create a socio-economically just society. But soon this attempt failed, as much depended on personal inclinations of the Caliphs rather than on any systematic ideology.

According to the Egyptian author of *Al-Yameen wa al-Yasar fil Islam*, Hazrat Abu Bakr and Hazrat Umar, in the early period of his *khilafat* (Caliphate) followed centrist economic policies, but later he took the advice of Hazrat Ali seriously, and rigorously enforced economically just policies. However, it was rather late, as soon after he was assassinated by his slave.

But Hazrat Usman, being a lenient administrator, came under pressure and changed land policy which Hazrat Umar had followed and allowed the companions of the Prophet to exchange their border land for land in Hijaz. This caused much turmoil because Hazrat Usman, according to Khurshid Ahmed Fariq, gave generous gifts to his relatives and friends from Bait al-Maal. Ultimately, a civil war broke out. Of course, there were more factors to it than only the policies of Hazrat Usman.

Dr Taha Husain, another eminent historian and scholar of Islam from Egypt, discusses these factors in his book *Al-Fitnat al-Kubra* (The Great Insurrection). Some companions of the Prophet like Hazrat Talha and Hazrat Zubayr had accumulated a lot of wealth. Thus, we find in *Tabqat Ibn Sa'd* that, when they died, they left behind a great deal of gold and silver and more than 1,000 horses and a large number of slaves. Prof Fariq, quoting sources, estimates that Hazrat Usman left behind 1 crore and 60 lakh dirhmas when he was assassinated, and all this was looted by the insurrectionists who had surrounded his house.

Let us remember that this wealth was generated from two sources: trade and *ghanima* (loot in the wars of conquests; Baladhuri has given figures in his *Futuh al-Buldan* i.e. Conquest of Countries). With these conquests, the whole economic scenario, especially of Bedouin Arabs, changed and they began to lead comfortable lives.

We should also remember that then Arab economy was basically mercantile, which depended on trade and production of date palms from few oases. Thus, it cannot be compared with modern industrial economy and its problems. And with the monarchy of Yazid, the economy underwent further changes and it became more feudal than mercantile.

Thus, one must understand these specificities of then Islamic society before comparing it with modern political and economic ideologies. However, one can say that the greatest contribution of Islam was the concept of welfare state and establishment of *Bait al-maal* in its early stages. But with establishment of monarchy and feudalisation, *Bait al-Maal* also ceased to be a source of welfare of the people.



Two Great Modern Thinkers

The subcontinent produced many great Islamic thinkers throughout the mediaeval period and even during the time when the Mughals were on the decline.

During the British rule, two great thinkers came to prominence: Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. While Sir Syed belonged to the 19th century, Maulana Azad lived and worked through the 20th century. Both were great Islamic thinkers. Sir Syed, though known more for his establishment of the modern educational institution, the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College (MAO), which became Aligarh Muslim University in 1920, was also an Islamic thinker in his own right. Sir Syed's services to the community in the field of education perhaps overshadowed his Islamic scholarship.

His scholarship was original. He wrote books in defence of Islam when some British and western orientalists found faults with it. His book, *Essays on the Life of Muhammad*, is an important work from the modernist point of view. More than that his commentary on the *Quran*, which he could not complete because he was forced by orthodox ulema to abandon it, is quite significant.

Sir Syed was earlier influenced by the puritan Wahabi ideology;

he later changed track and came under the influence of the Muttazila school of thought, arguing that it was closer to the rationalist point of view. His commentary on the *Quran*, published under the title of *Tafsir al-the Quran wa huwa al-huda wa al-Furqan* is, to my mind, a milestone in the 19th century commentary literature which came into being as a result of countering western, rational challenges.

Sir Syed's commentary and scholarship, could be compared with his Egyptian contemporary, Muhammad Abduh. Abduh was also influenced by western rationalism and adopted a modernist view on many aspects. He, like Sir Syed, devoted himself to spreading education among his people and shunned politics in his later years.

Under pressure from traditional ulema, Sir Syed gave up writing the commentary and began to spread modern education among Muslims. He thought this was more important than insisting on writing the commentary. He argued that if modern education took hold, Muslims could understand the *Quran* in a rational way. Unfortunately, that did not happen and the orthodox ulema continued to have sway over the Muslim mind.

Sir Syed's commentary went out of print and no one was interested in reprinting it. Thanks to Khudabakhsh Oriental Public Library, Patna, it became available in India, again about a decade ago.

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad's commentary on the *Quran* is equally significant. Azad was greatly influenced by Sir Syed in his earlier days though later he charted his own course. He too could not complete his commentary though for a different reason. He had written his commentary during his internment at Ranchi in the 1920s. Unlike Sir Syed, Azad was a freedom fighter and his political activities kept him so busy that he could not complete the commentary.

Azad's commentary is somewhat different from Sir Syed's, though similar in spirit. He tends to be more traditional. Unlike Sir Syed, he does not write under the influence of the Muttazila school, though his approach, too, is not orthodox. He claims, in the introductory part, that he went through all the available *tafsir* literature before writing his commentary. Thus, Azad was fully conscious of what was written in

the past and without significant departure from the traditional line, he made his commentary much more relevant to modern times. Also, his prose style is much simpler than Sir Syed's.

Azad's commentary on Surah Fatihah, the very first chapter of the *Quran*, is unique and remains unbeatable by other commentators. Also, he devotes one volume of his *tafsir* to what he calls *wahdat-i-din* (unity of religion), basing his view on the Quranic text. This is his unique contribution, and leaves one wondering at his knowledge of other religions and philosophies, like Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism, etc.

Azad maintains that *din* (religion) is one, though laws (sharia) differ from religion to religion. Differences in these laws are because of culture, customs and traditions, not because of principles and values. He supports his thesis by quoting extensively from the *Quran* and other religious texts. Though one finds the doctrine of *wahdat-i-din* in *tafsir* literature before Azad also, like in Shah Waliyullah's *Hujjatillah al-Baligha*, but one does not find here a scholarship of other religious texts. Maulana Azad's *tafsir* is thus much more inclusive.

Both Sir Syed and Maulana Azad have made rich contributions to the *tafsir* literature in modern times, which needs to be popularised.



Fate as Explained in the Quran

Is a human being's *taqdir* (fate) pre-determined by Allah? This is a common belief among many, though not all Muslims. What is the truth? This discussion about *taqdir* was debated first during the Umayyad period and again, as far as India is concerned, in the 19th century. Such discussions become more vigorous either when people are faced with some serious crisis or when a whole community is on the decline.

During the Umayyad period, there was a political crisis. The Umayyad's very legitimacy was in doubt as Yazid, the first successor Caliph of his father Mu'awiyah, was the killer of the Prophet's grandson Imam Husain. Thus, Umayyad regime was rejected by many Muslims as illegitimate and un-Islamic. Then the supporters of the Umayyad regime came out with a rather ingenious argument that Yazid did what was destined by Allah and it was Husain's destiny to be killed at the hands of Yazid! The Umayyads, of course, could not overcome their legitimacy crisis with such dubious arguments.

When the Muslim ruling class was in serious decline in the 19th century, many Muslims again came out with this argument that it was pre-determined and hence could not be helped. Sir Syed came out against this position with a Quranic verse: "Allah changes not

condition of a people, until they change their own condition." (13:11) Since Sir Syed was trying to change the condition of Muslims who had become stagnant and were justifying their decline on their *taqdir*, Sir Syed had to come out with this Quranic argument.

What is *taqdir*? Is it something that Allah has destined for individuals, which cannot be altered under any circumstances and has to take place? I think this is a total misconception. The word *taqdir* is derived from *qudrat* (ability or power) and one who has this ability is called *qadir* and Allah is *Qadir-e-Mutlaq* — one who has absolute power or ability.

Thus, *taqdir* means to estimate proper ability to do something. Allah has given an innate ability or competence to human beings and they act accordingly. It is for a human being to actualise that ability or competence. A human being has certain innate ability; if he does not actualize it, it will remain dormant and he or she will not be able to achieve anything. It is a must that the human agent must act.

But we have taken it in a totally different meaning. We do not act to actualize our innate abilities and then blame our *taqdir*. One who does not act will suffer. Thus, constant effort to achieve something is necessary. That is why Allah says that He does not change the condition of those who do not care to change their own condition.

Imam Raghib Asfahani says in his *Mufradat al-Qur'an* that, when a human being is the actor (*fa'il*) of *taqdir*, it has two senses; one is *taqdir-e-mahmood* — where one thinks and reflects using his intellect and then acts according to the result of such reflection. Second is *taqdir-e-mazmoom* — where a person thinks or acts according to his selfish desires. Such an act cannot result in the good of others. Of the *taqdeer-e-mazmoom*, Imam Raghib gives the example of verses 18-19 of chapter 74. The *Quran* says, "Surely he reflected and determined. But may he be destroyed how he determined."

This and other verses of the *Quran* clearly show that *taqdir* requires both reflection and thinking; acting on it does not indicate in any way accepting one's fate. Allah has given us all certain potentials and powers, but has left to us to act and actualize. It is of course our *taqdir* to have

some potential, but it is our choice to act or stay idle.

In a sense, we are all pre-determined in as much as we have been gifted with certain potentialities, but *taqdir* would not mean those abilities will come into effect automatically whether we act or not. In a sense, even to be born human is our *taqdir*, but then, to be a full human with all its innate abilities is dependent on our action. Allama Iqbal went to another extreme in this respect when he said that you should raise your 'self' (*khudi*) to such an extent that Allah would ask you what your wish is which is to be gifted to you by Him!

Thus, one has to struggle and be dynamic to change our condition for the better and world at large. That is the real meaning of *taqdir*.



Is Music Prohibited in Islam?

I once happened to read an article in the Friday edition of an Urdu newspaper, which quoted few *ahadith* (Prophet's sayings) that purportedly said music was strictly prohibited in Islam and that those Muslims who burnt musical instruments would be sent to paradise by Allah. Many non-Muslims also ask why Islam is opposed to music. The Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb is also said to have strictly prohibited music.

Is music really prohibited in Islam? My studies show it is not prohibited *per se*. The *Quran* denounces what it calls *lahw wa la'b* (fun and play), and there is a background to it. The Arabs in pre-Islamic times had no serious religious faith; they used to indulge in drinking, singing and dancing as we often witness in our societies also. Islam wanted to engage people in serious activities of reforming social evils and making them obedient to Allah, thereby becoming good, just and compassionate human beings, undertaking a fight against all prevailing social evils. For such a way of life, naturally *lahw wa la'b* was a serious obstacle, and hence the *Quran* warned people against that.

However, most Muslims could not distinguish between the two and banned the music, whatever its form or context. While the ulema denounced music, sufi saints generally approved of it, distinguishing between *lahw wa la'b* and music as a tool of realisation. They argued

that music could induce a sort of ecstasy which, in turn, helped in realisation of the Ultimate. *Sama'*, which literally means listening to music, was practised by sufi saints.

It was for *sama* that the *qawwali* was invented, as far as my knowledge goes, by Amir Khusro—the celebrated disciple of Nizamuddin Auliya who used to have *sama' mehfil* (congregation for devotional music). The ulema, who were jealous of Nizamuddin Auliya's popularity, issued a *fatwa* (religious edict) against him for attending *sama' mehfil*, and the then Sultan of Delhi asked him to come to his court and defend himself. He went to the Sultan's court (otherwise he never paid court to any sultan) and defended himself by reciting certain *ahadith* and came away. Maulana Rum had gone a step further and even resorted to dancing to induce such divine ecstasy. His followers often resort to dancing and are known as whirling dervishes.

It was because of such controversies created by the *ulema* that an eminent sufi and scholar like Ghazzali wrote an epistle on *Status of Music in Islam—Discipline and Rules of Music and Ecstasy*. It is worth reading for all those who want to understand whether Islam prohibits music or not. Or, if it prohibits music, what kind of music is prohibited.

Al-Ghazzali begins his *Risala* on music with these words: "Know this my dear about the fact and situation of man that there is a secret of God which is hidden in the human heart, which is similar to the one that is between iron and stone. Just as fire emits when iron strikes stone and sets the forest on fire, a movement occurs in the human heart when it hears good and rhythmical sounds. And unconsciously a new situation comes into existence in the heart."

He further says, "The upper world of beauty and grace and the fundamental of beauty and grace is due proportion. And, whatever is proportionate is the manifestation of the beauty of that upper world. The beauty and proportion that we see in this world is the product of the beauty and grace of the upper world. Therefore, good, rhythmical and proportionate sound has a similarity with some of the wonders of the upper world. And it provides new information in the heart in the form of a movement and eagerness."

Further, Ghazzali says, "Whoever's heart is filled with the fire of the eagerness of God, music becomes necessary for him, so that the fire may burn brighter. The same music becomes *haram* (prohibited) and poisonous for a man, whose heart is full of the love of wrongful matters."

What is this wrongful matter Ghazzali refers to? It is lust, fun and music meant for worldly pleasure like the ones youngsters indulge in after drinking in clubs, pubs and discotheques. Of course, Indian classical music does not fall in this category as it is a great art and discipline. Even qawwali and ghazal singing are based on Indian classical music or, for that matter, Western classical symphonies.

Ghazzali does not base his epistle only on such arguments, but also on the *ahadith* that tell us how the Prophet (PBUH) Himself used to listen to music along with Aisha, his beloved wife.



Social Reforms in Islam

The traditional ulema have always opposed social reforms calling them un-Islamic. They somehow also manage to mobilize support from a static Muslim society by quoting either certain selected Quranic verses or ahadith which may or may not be authentic. Once such *fatwas* are issued, the reformer faces total isolation from the society and finds it difficult to carry on the reformist movement.

Sample Sir Syed: He was one such great social reformer who never touched any religious doctrine, but wanted Muslims to go for modern secular education so that the gates of the modern knowledge, which was mostly available in English, opened to them. The ulema opposed his movement for modern education and founding an institution of modern learning, issued *fatwas* against him and dubbed him as '*kafir*', 'Christian' and 'Yahudi'. One of them even travelled to Mecca and obtained a *fatwa* for his killing!

Why such fierce opposition to social reforms, which was, after all, for the betterment of the Muslim community in India? It was certainly not a mere religious belief. Opposition to social reforms emanates from a host of complex factors. First, change is always feared as it brings uncertainty and unknown consequences, especially on the part of those who

do not benefit from change. Apart from theologians and community leaders, it is feared by the masses that have not experienced any change and have lived in ignorance and superstitious beliefs.

Second, it is feared by the priesthood and theologians as well as some socio-cultural leaders most, as it challenges their leadership. The priests and theologians have had a vice-like grip over the minds of people for long and they feel any change will throw up new social or theological leaders. So they begin to oppose any change to secure their own positions. And to legitimize their opposition, they find religious reasons and try to quote from scriptures to impress the masses.

The ulema in the 19th century were apprehensive of English education, as it would mean challenging the *madrassah* education; they also feared that Muslims will go a step nearer to Christianity. As Arabic education was considered a step towards Islam, English education was considered a step towards Christianity!

There was one more reason for the ulema to oppose modern education. The ulema had held positions high in the Mughal courts; they functioned as *qazis* or religious judges. These *qazis* were being replaced by British judges and highly qualified Indians who had studied law. This created strong resentment among the ulema and they denounced English education, which was taking away everything from them.

Muslim masses supported them too, firstly because they used to recognise these ulema as their religious leaders and men of great Islamic learning. Second, the whole Muslim society was static and decadent. Any change made them fearful, and they rightly considered the British, the enemy that threatened their religious belief and political hegemony. 'The future was unknown and in the hands of foreign rulers.'

Among Indian Muslims, Sir Syed began a nationwide movement for modern education even before a new class of Muslims could benefit from English education. Eventually, that class emerged, albeit slowly. That class subsequently became a harbinger of change. Among these people, a galaxy of intellectuals arose who are respected even today. Among them were Nawwab Muhsinul Mulk, Maulavi Chiragh Ali, Justice Amir Ali, Maulavi Mumtaz Ali Khan and several others. They

developed new visions of life and laid the foundation for a better life for Muslims. Many of this new class of Muslims joined the civil, police and other services and earned fame.

Today, many ulema are not only learning English but also trying to project Islam to non-Muslims in English language. What was thought to be a language of *kafirs* has come to stay in the Muslim world. Those who oppose change subsequently not only accept it but the change also becomes for them their very means of survival. It is unfortunate that our ulema vehemently oppose everything new in the beginning and then accept it for their own survival. We often refuse to move with the times and then time forces us to move with it after paying the price for our refusal to change.



Rethinking Issues in Islam

When Milad un Nabi (PBUH) is celebrated, processions are taken out and leaders and ulema show their skills of oratory, claiming Islam is the solution of all the problems. This rhetoric is repeated year after year. No one uses this occasion to reflect deeply why the Islamic world is in turmoil and riddled with serious problems, if Islam is indeed the solution of all these problems. The harsh reality is that we use such rhetoric to hide the truth. It needs, not only an honest reflection but also serious rethinking of issues we are faced with. We should also realise that what is happening in the Islamic world today is contrary to what the *Quran* teaches; yet we are never tired of boasting about these teachings.

For example, we say Islam gives equal rights to women while in the Islamic world, women are the most backward and oppressed, facing serious problems. We claim that the *Quran* lays a great deal of emphasis on *'ilm* (knowledge) and there are innumerable verses, perhaps more than on any other subject, on *'ilm*. But we find the Islamic world riddled with illiteracy, never having tried to excel in acquisition and dissemination of knowledge in the modern world.

It does not have a university which can be listed in the top 100 universities of the world. It has not produced any Nobel Laureate in

natural sciences except Abd us Salam who worked and did his research in the US. The Islamic world was more concerned about his being an Ahmadi than being proud of his achievement. His proposal to Saudi Arabia to finance his laboratory for research in particle physics was rejected. It was then financed by the UNESCO.

The *Quran* lays great emphasis on justice and it is one of the names of Allah (Allah is '*Adil*) but we hardly find traces of justice in the Islamic world. In fact, like the five pillars of Islam — *shahadah* (monotheism and accepting Mohammed (PBUH) as God's messenger, *salat* (five daily prayers: *fajr*, *dhuhr*, *asr*, *maghrib* and *isha'a*), *sawm* (abstention from food, money and word in stipulated periods), *zakat* (alms giving) and *haj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) — there are five most fundamental values in the *Quran*: Truth (*Haq*), justice (*'Adl*), benevolence (*Ehsan*), compassion (*Rahmah*) and wisdom (*Hikmah*). These are all Allah's names and hence these values are most fundamental. We emphasise on the five pillars of Islam (and rightly so) but never emphasise these five values.

Cast a look at the Islamic world and you will find Muslims enthusiastically emphasizing and even practicing these five pillars, but you will hardly find Muslims practising these values. In fact, these values are highly modern and indeed represent the solution to many of our modern problems today. But while the *Quran* greatly emphasizes these values, Islamic world totally neglects them.

If we go beyond our rhetoric and grapple with reality, we should make a serious attempt to establish causes of lack of enthusiasm for these values in the Islamic world. Why do our great orators emphasise only these five pillars and not these five values? I think until modern times no other system ever emphasized these values so much as the *Quran* did and yet the whole history of Islam is bereft of these values.

Is it not true that the Muslim ruling classes found these values great obstacles to their interests and saw that these values were not emphasized at all? Any serious student of the *Quran*, reflecting honestly on its teachings, would know that these five pillars and five values are not only complementary to each other but also one would be incomplete without the other.

But we know that the ruling classes have deep influence on the entire political and educational system to smother any attempt to emphasise both. And without practicing these values, Muslims can never take a lead in the world. 'Islam is the solution' will remain only an empty rhetoric, repeated endlessly.

Knowledge brings awareness and awareness translates into action. In the Islamic world of today, there is neither awareness nor action and any popular movement is put down by the ruling classes. Is it not an invitation for serious re-thinking for Muslim intellectuals?



The Concept of Justice in Islam

The concept of justice is most fundamental in Islam so much so that the *Quran* says, "O you who believe, be upright for Allah' bearers of witness with justice; and let not hatred of a people incite you not to act equitably. Be just; that is nearer to being pious and fear Allah, Surely Allah is Aware of what you do." (5:8) The significance of this verse cannot be lost on Muslims who not only believe in the divine book but also act according to it.

Justice in fact, is the most fundamental value in Islam and it is not for nothing that it is one of Allah's name ('Adil). Those who believe in Allah cannot deny the role of justice in human life. In the verse above, justice is so fundamental that it must be done even with one's enemy. Enmity with a person or a community should not come in the way of justice.

Among the Arabs siding with one's own *qaum* (tribe, nation) was a norm to side with their own tribe even if it was in the wrong. Then the *Quran* upheld justice, not the Arab tribal norms. It is indeed very surprising that in that time and that society where everything was based on tribal practices, the *Quran* comes out with universal norms which have been accepted only in modern times.

There are two words repeatedly used in the *Quran*: '*adl*' and '*qist*', and

both these words mean same thing—justice. The Islamic jurisprudence is also based on this central value, be it in case of marriage, divorce, inheritance or criminal laws of Islam. Some punishments for certain crimes may appear very harsh and Muslim jurists have differed about their application, but they all agree that the end of justice must be met. An innocent person cannot be punished on mere suspicion.

In modern times, it was only after the advent of socialism and socialist philosophy that justice to the weaker sections became important, but the weak did not acquire the status and dignity they deserved in the modern capitalist society. The *Quran* treats the weak with full dignity and requires justice done to them. Those who do not give their due to orphans, widows and poor are beliers of *din* (i.e. religion).

The weak are referred to in the *Quran* as *mustad'ifin* and the ruling classes or powerful are known as *mustakbirin*; the *Quran* makes it clear that its sympathies are with *mustad'ifin* and not with *mustakbirin*. The *Quran* says that the *mustad'ifin* will rule over this earth and will inherit it. (see 28:5). The Communist manifesto talked of 'dictatorship of the proletariat' but the *Quran*, more than 14 hundred years ago had talked of the rule of weaker sections of society, though not of dictatorship, as dictatorship leads to injustice and power can easily lead to injustices.

Today the Islamic world is far from this Quranic ideal. One hardly finds justice in Islamic societies. Even personal laws are no more just. What was just in the 8th and 9th centuries when these laws were formulated is no more just today when the concept of justice has greatly expanded, including human rights as well. To be in the spirit of the *Quran*, they have to be re-thought.

Also, one hardly finds social or political justice in Muslim countries. The rulers tend to be undemocratic and dictatorial and human rights is treated with contempt and denounced as 'Western' in origin and not acceptable to Islam. Most Muslim countries are still wallowing in feudal or semi-feudal eras where the concept of justice tends to be feudal in its orientation. The Quranic concept of justice transcends both tribal and feudal eras. It is universal in nature.

Islam tends to be only worship-oriented i.e. limited to certain

prescribed rituals of worships like prayers, fasting and hajj. These acts of worship also carry deep imprint of equality, human dignity and justice, but in case of Muslims they are totally devoid of any spirituality and social message. They are nothing more than rituals. Allama Iqbal rightly pointed out that we could construct mosques with all enthusiasm in one night but our hearts are old sinners that, after years of prayer, are devoid of the real spirit of *namaz*.

Unless we become rigorous just in the spirit of the *Quran*, we cannot claim to be real Muslims.



Child Marriage

Riyadh once made headlines when Saudi Arabia contemplated a ban on marriages for girls under the age of 18. This became necessary because of the case of a girl of eight years who was married off to a man more than 40 years her senior. Many Saudi jurists and the ulema upheld such marriages. Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdul Aziz al Sheikh endorsed the practice of marrying underage girls, arguing that in doing so they avoided spinsterhood or the temptation of engaging in relationships outside of wedlock.

According to the news, many young girls in Arab countries that observe tribal traditions, are married to older husbands but not before puberty. Such marriages are also driven by poverty in countries like Yemen, one of the poorest countries outside Africa. But in countries like Saudi Arabia, it is more of a tribal tradition which is practiced in the name of Islam.

Here, the main question is whether Islam permits child marriage. If you ask any traditional jurist he would answer in the affirmative. However, it was more of a pre-Islamic tradition which became a part of Islam. Our *fuqaha* (jurists) and *ulama* (theologians) generally justify it on the basis of Prophet (PBUH) having married Aisha when the lat-

ter was all of seven. It is doubtful if Prophet of Islam (PBUH) would marry such a young child.

Modern researchers have established that the hadith regarding Hazrat Aisha's marriage has appeared 300 years after the death of the Holy Prophet. It cannot be relied upon. Moreover the *Quran* describes marriage as *mithaqan ghaliza* (strong covenant) and if a marriage is contractual, how can one enter into a contract with a child who is hardly conscious of the implications of such a marriage?

It was for this reason that the Hanafi jurisprudence has made a provision for what is called *khiyar al-bulugh* (i.e. option of puberty). According to this, if a child is married pre-puberty, she has the option of accepting or repudiating the marriage on achieving the age of puberty. The contractual nature of marriage cannot be altered.

In our traditional culture, various pressures work on a girl's mind, and once she is married off, it is very difficult for her to repudiate that marriage. Thus, the Quranic principle is very sound and must not be sidelined to uphold traditional practices. Most Muslim communities give priority to their own respective traditions than Islamic principles, and jurists hailing from the same traditional cultures find ways to justify such practices. And then these practices acquire the halo of the *Shari'ah*!

Since our jurists insist on these traditions, Islam becomes a laughing stock for the world media. This girl who was married to a man 50 years old in Saudi Arabia was finally divorced by her husband only under pressure from the media. And only because of such pressure, the Saudi authorities are considering banning marriage of girls below 18 years of age. In fact, this measure will be quite in keeping with Islamic principles.

What is known as the *Shari'ah* includes a number of pre-Islamic Arab traditions and customary practices known as *aadat* (practices). Since the *Quran* was revealed among Arabs and they were the first to embrace Islam, their practices were accepted as part of the *Shari'ah*, and Islamic principles had to be applied to the body of these *aadats*. However, as Islam spread to other areas, local customary laws also entered the fray in the name of the *Shari'ah*.

The Islamic principles as contained in the *Quran* are universal

and surprisingly modern. It is unfortunate that our jurists and ulama are not ready to rethink our present laws which are an admixture of Islamic principles and *aadat*. For them, the *Shari'ah* once formulated has become eternal though no student of classical Islamic jurisprudence will agree with such an approach.

Whatever was formulated in the past must be reviewed in the light of the Quranic pronouncements, and child marriage must be banned. If the news I have referred to above is true, the move by the Saudi authorities to ban child marriage is welcome. If the Saudis take this initiative, others can follow. However, legislation, though quite necessary, is not enough. Many laws continue to be violated in practice.

Awareness has to be created among women as, more often than not, they are the victims. A greater problem lies in the rural areas because of illiteracy.



Islam and Social Reforms

Whenever one talks of religion and reform, one faces stiff opposition and is accused of reforming a religion which is supposed to be a godsent. All eminent social reformers like Sir Syed Ahmed, Justice Amir Ali, Maulavi Chiragh Ali, Dr Mohammad Iqbal and others have faced such opposition. One should not forget that religion, as we inherit and practice it, is a mix of divine injunctions, theological formulations and indigenous customs and traditions. Everything in religion is not divine.

And certain divine injunctions have also certain social context that might change over a period of time. Certain divine injunctions are totally transcendent and eternal in nature. This distinction is also of great relevance for a reformer. As far as Islam is concerned, commentators on the *Quran* also developed a volume of literature called *asbab al nuzul* (occasions of revelation of various the Quranic verses); they tried to understand the Quranic verses in the light of what preceded the revelation. Thus the context assumes importance.

In matters of the *Shari'ah*, jurists and eminent founders of various schools of law recognised the role of *aadat*. Many jurists of subsequent generations also recognised this importance in places where Islam spread

later. Changing the social context as well as local customs and traditions cannot be elevated to the status of the divine as often done by Muslims of latter-day generations.

Changing the contexts that are cultural, historical and the new developments may necessitate change and reform; without such changes, the vitality and dynamism of religion is lost. These changes would not mean changing eternal divine injunctions. If religion is divided between *'ibadat* and *mu'amalat*, the second will deal with what is between human beings, which can be subjected to change, while *'ibadat* would deal with what is between human beings and Allah; this cannot be changed.

Certain injunctions pertaining to women have generated a great deal of controversy from the 19th century onwards and these controversies rage even today. The orthodox and the conservative, oppose any change in respect of not only the Shari'ah pertaining to women but also those pertaining to *aadat* are opposed to it. Everything is considered divine and no change can be admissible!

The *burqa* is being talked about everywhere, after French President Nicolas Sarkozy talked of banning it in France. One can certainly question Sarkozy's intention as an interference in religion or his pronouncement as undemocratic and interfering with personal freedom, but one should not forget that there is hardly any unanimity among Muslim theologians, much less among Muslim intellectuals, about the proper form of veil or *hijab*.

The Quranic verse 24:31 is subject to different interpretations and it is hardly established by any other Quranic verse to completely cover ones face revealing only the eyes. Verse 24:31 pertains to zeenah (adornment), not to veiling ones face. It is also disputed whether purdah pre-existed Islam as Maulana Shibli shows in his article on purdah or it came into existence much later during the 7th century hijrah (13th century A D) as Justice Amir Ali maintains. If Maulana Shibli is right, purdah became Islamic as part of *aadat*.

Whatever it is, a social reformer has to basically discuss the role of women in society. Even if some kind of a veil is recommended by the *Quran*, has it curbed the social role of women as has happened in

traditional Muslim societies? In Saudi Arabia, women are virtual prisoners and subordinated to men's authority.

It is an irony that all theologians swear by gender equality in Islam and then proceed to restrict the role of women in myriad ways in social, economic and political matters. Dar-ul-Uloom, Deoband, had once issued an edict that women could not contest elections, whereas Saudi Arabia does not allow women to vote in municipal elections (there are no other elections in Saudi Arabia)!

Apart from this, Muslim theologians are prompt to prohibit any new invention. In the 19th century, as we find in several fatwas, even loudspeakers were declared haram for use in namaz and so was the clock! The Church too had prohibited the use of clock much earlier in Europe when it was invented. In the modern era when heart transplant became possible, it was declared haram and I saw a lengthy article by a prominent 'alim in India who explained why heart and other transplants were sacrilegious! Later on, it was declared permissible under the doctrine of *zaroorat* (necessity for saving human life).

We thus need to develop a proper understanding of social change; what is an essential part of religion that is immutable and what is permissible to change and reform. Unfortunately, there is a woeful lack of such theory in Islamic theology today. Muslim theologians and intellectuals must come together and develop such a theory.



Islam, Democracy and Modernity

Since most of the Islamic countries have authoritarian governments, it has become a part of academic discourse that Islam is not compatible with democracy and that Islam and modernity cannot go together. It is further believed that Islam divides the world into *Dar-ul-Islam* and *Dar-ul-Harb*. On the Internet, this discussion goes on and on.

To a great extent what happens in Islamic societies is responsible for such a discourse. Many Islamic theologians still believe that Islam and democracy do not go together. Maulana Maududi of *Jamat-e-Islami* had coined a term '*theo-democracy*' — Islamic democracy would be theological in content as a parliament in Islamic country cannot legislate as far as shari'ah are concerned; it can legislate only in administrative and subsidiary matters.

Some theologians do believe in *Dar-ul-harb* and *Darul Islam* which finds no mention anywhere in the *Quran* or hadith. It was a juristic opinion in mediaeval ages when nature of polity was very different i.e. authoritarian and monarchical and there was no concept whatsoever of basic rights or freedom of conscience. Perhaps Islam was the first religion whose scripture clearly proclaimed the doctrine of freedom of conscience (2:256). But since Islam entered feudal age with Umayyad

period such democratic values were lost and could not be re-appropriated till today by the Islamic world.

Islam is not at all incompatible with democracy. What has been going on in the Islamic countries (are they really Islamic?) cannot determine what really Islam stands for. At best one can call it an empirical reality, not an ideological doctrine. In fact, it is conservative elements who always feel deeply insecure by any kind of change in social and political structure, who come out with such formulations.

Any scholar of Islam who studies the *Quran*, the revealed scripture of Islam, will not find any such formulations in it. In fact the *Quran*, as pointed out by many scholars, does not give any concept of state. It gives only the concept of society – a just, exploitation free society and state whose form might change from time to time. The *Khilafah*, which depended on Muslims opinion and was quasi-democratic in nature, did not last more than thirty years and was replaced by Umayyad dynastic rule. *Khilafah* could never be reinstated again though various dynastic rulers continued to claim being *Khalifah*. It ceased to be a system and became titular nomenclature.

How Islamic teachings could be blamed for what happened in history. History of any religion represents mere empirical reality which is determined by complex historical forces. When even monarchs who seized power by sheer force of sword could claim to be *Khalifah*, why can't democracy which is based on popular will, be construed as Islamic? What makes it un-Islamic?

If *khilafah* represents Islamic model of government, it is far closer to democratic governance than monarchy, sheikhdom or military dictatorship. By merely proclaiming a state as Islamic and selectively enforcing certain Islamic shari'ah rules, a state does not become Islamic. Political authoritarianism goes very much against Islamic values as embodied in the *Quran*.

Freedom of conscience is key to democratic governance and that is why during the period of *khilafah* even a most ordinary person could freely question the ways or decisions of *khalifah* including women. This is just not possible in any authoritarian regime. It is only democratiza-

tion of Islamic world which will solve many serious problems afflicting these countries. There are no democratic freedoms today in any Islamic country. Human rights are not respected at all. In fact those demanding human rights are either jailed or harassed in a number of ways.

It is wrong to say that human rights are a Western concept and are unacceptable to Islamic countries. The authoritarian rulers, who otherwise support all Western policies and suppress popular movements, give bad name to this concept to try to get rid of it so that their authoritarianism is not challenged. In fact human dignity, which is the basis of human rights, is very fundamental to Islamic teachings.

It is very unfortunate that rulers of Muslim countries, if at all talk of human rights, it is under pressure from western governments and not because it is enshrined in Islamic teachings. Let us remember Islam is neither un-democratic nor anti-modern. It is extremely conservative theologians or powerful vested interests who are responsible for spreading the impression that Islam is non-compatible with democracy. Justice and equality are very fundamental to Islamic teachings and if this is not democratic, what is?



Islamic Heritage – Rational or Traditional?

We Muslims always proudly refer to our heritage, but Islamic heritage is like any other heritage—very complex in nature. It is religious heritage, cultural heritage or civilisational heritage. Also, heritage could be traditional as well as rational. We hardly specify and yet we feel proud of our heritage. While traditional heritage has its own importance and is as much a part of Islamic history, we hardly emphasize our rational heritage.

The *Quran* itself lays great deal of emphasis on reason ('*aql*) and knowledge ('*ilm*) but in our traditional inheritance '*aql* has been used more as rationalizing what is dogmatic than use of reason as an instrument of critically examining the issues. Our traditional 'ulama developed '*ilm al-kalam* to defend traditions and dogmas. And, in like manner, knowledge was sought to be confined to knowledge of traditional beliefs what is generally referred to as *din*.

Imam Ash'ari was the leader of those who demolished what was rational and today our beliefs are mostly based on Imam Ash'ari's formulations. There was heated debate between traditional Ash'a'ira and rational Mu'tazila. What survived was Ash'a'ira heritage and Mu'tazila became history. The debates between Ash'a'ira and Mu'tazila are an interesting part

of early Islamic history and a valuable part of Islamic heritage.

Various debates started right from early history of Islam. As a result, sects like Jabriya and Qadriya also came into existence. During early Umayyad period, a fierce debate started whether a human being is free or determined. It acquired a political hue. Those who believed a human being is a free agent were by and large supporters of Umayyads. The implication was that Umayyads' rule has been destined by Allah and must be accepted as such. Human beings cannot do anything about it.

On the other hand, those who believed that human beings are free agents were opponents of Umayyad rule and argued that Umayyad rule is not destined by Allah and can be overthrown. Allah cannot destine rule by oppressors. It is interesting to note that Imam Hasan Basri a great *alim* and opponent of Umayyad regime sided with those who believed human beings are free agent and he quoted from writings of Imam Hasan (grandson of the Prophet) to reinforce his position.

Again during the Abbasid period, another controversy erupted and it too became politicized. The controversy was about createdness (*makhlūq*) or uncreatedness (*ghayr makhlūq*) of the *Quran*. The Abbasids sided with Mu'tazila on this question, who believed in createdness of the *Quran*.

Mu'tazila were supporters of Abbasids and hence Abbasides took the side of createdness of the *Quran* in that debate and Abbasides had come to power by overthrowing Umayyads. Those traditionalists who, now, were politically neutral opposed the Mu'tazila doctrine and were persecuted by the Abbasids. Any one who opposed the doctrine of createdness of the *Quran* was considered the opponent of Abbasid regime.

Thus it will be seen that it is traditionalists who were persecuted in early history of Islam by rationalists as they were in power. It was only during the time of Abbasid Caliph M'utasim that the doctrine of createdness of the *Quran* was abandoned officially. Imam Abu Hanifa who was opposed to Umayyads too was lashed by Abbasid regime for refusing to subscribe to doctrine of createdness of the *Quran*.

This clearly shows that one should not politically enforce any doctrine – traditional or rational – by use of force and people should be left free to believe what they want to believe. It is for nothing that the

Quran clearly pronounced that there cannot be compulsion in matters of *din* but neither the traditionalists nor rationalists honored this the Quranic doctrine in practice.

It is important to note that many intellectuals during the nineteenth century colonial regime were influenced by M'utazila rationalism and tried to understand the *Quran* under M'utazila influence. Even Sir Syed, a modernist who tried to spread modern education among Muslims in late nineteenth century wrote his the Quranic commentary under M'utazila influence as rationalism again acquired central importance.

There is sharp contrast between the Umayyad and the Abbasid period. The former supported all traditional positions which resulted in stagnation and later supported rational positions which resulted in an era of Islamic enlightenment. The Abbasid regime saw great intellectual achievements and even Europe, which then was passing through the dark ages, learnt much from this rational Islamic heritage.

The *Bait al-Hikma* (House of Wisdom) which Abbasids established in Baghdad became a centre of new knowledge and H G Wells in his *A Short History of the World* described Arabs as foster fathers of knowledge and philosophy. Europe would not have discovered Greek heritage but for this House of Wisdom. It is certainly a lasting contribution of Arabs to human heritage as a whole.



Muslim Reformists' Conference at Oxford University

At a conference at the University of Oxford, in UK, it was for the first time that a lady Islamic scholar from Canada Mrs Raheel Raza led the Friday prayers. Raheel's *khutba* was on theme of reforms and change.

The most important thing for a reformer is that he or she should have deep conviction in the faith one seeks to reform. Though all those scholars who were participating in the conference were of diverse cultures, speaking different languages and diverse ethnic stocks, they had one thing in common—their pride in being Muslim. However, they were also convinced that Islamic laws as developed during mediaeval ages need urgent change and the *Quran* needs to be reinterpreted in keeping with new challenges emerging around us in the globalized world.

Edip Yuksel, one of the participants, was an orthodox alim from Turkey and had written extensively in Turkish from conservative point of view at one time. However, over a period of time his views changed and he became convinced that critical thinking on various Islamic issues is a must and he had a fresh look at the *Quranic* text. He concluded that earlier translations by eminent Muslim commentators (*mufassirs*), however scholarly, are not satisfactory and he, along with two other

scholars Layth Saleh al-Shaiban and Martha Schule Nafeh attempted fresh translation that has been published as *Quran – A reformist Translation*. It is worth studying as these three scholars have gone into the roots of crucial Arabic words used in the *Quran* to capture the real spirit of the holy text to rid it of superstitious approach to many issues.

Some of the subjects discussed at the conference were "The Paradigm of Islamic Reforms – History and Heritage", "Theological and Philosophical Imperatives for Islamic Reform", "New *Quranic* Hermeneutics, Muslim Law and Islamic Reformation, "Islam Science, Culture and Freedom -Towards a Muslim Renaissance", Gender, "Sexuality and Human Rights in Islamic Discourse" and "Media, War on Terror and Western Foreign Policy".

It is interesting to note that all discussions were *Quran*-centric as against hadith centric in conventional Islam. Some scholars were of the opinion that hadith-centric Islam could not admit reform and change and the *Quran* was after all totally divine and there was absolutely no difference of opinion about it. *Ahadith* are not only controversial but are also based on Arab culture, customs and traditions. The *Quran*, on the other hand, being of divine origin, goes beyond any geographical area and is not restricted by any time period. It is, in other words, beyond space and time.

However, some other scholars felt that though many *ahadith* were controversial there were many which were in conformity with the *Quran* and normative in nature (apart from those which are contextual) and could serve a useful purpose even for re-understanding the Quranic text and for reform. Despite some such differences on these issues, all participants were united in their approach to reform.

The participants also felt that values and principles are immutable, not laws based on these values and principles. Laws must remain dynamic and change with social needs. It is values which provide moral base and stability to society and five values are most fundamental in the *Quran*: Truth (*Haq*), justice (*Adl*), benevolence (*Ehsan*), Compassion (*Rahmah*) and Wisdom (*Hikmah*).

No Islamic law should violate these fundamental values and any

law framed to serve social needs must change to uphold these values. All reforms to be attempted, should be with a view to strengthen these values as for application of values, law serves as a tool. Law is not the end but a means to achieve implementation of these values. Also, any change and reform must keep *maqasid* (objectives) and *masalih* (interests and welfare) of society. The conference concluded on this note.



Islam: The State or Civilisation?

Many scholars maintain that Islam and the state are inseparable, thus reducing Islam to a political ideology. This approach, though in a way historically dictated, has caused much power struggle among different groups of Muslims.

The bloodshed which took place between the Umayyads and the Abbasids is enough to horrify any religious Muslim, and yet this ideology has remained rooted in Islamic society for centuries; it has taken another form in a post-colonial society. In the Islamic world, dictator after dictator has seized power in the name of Islam and declared the establishment of an Islamic state, making 'Islamic' punishments binding.

They have imposed mediaeval jurisprudence uncritically, resulting, among other things, in serious gender disparity. Countries from various regions of the Islamic world have suffered from this practice. There are only few exceptions to the rule in the Muslim world today. Islam, one must understand, is not primarily a political ideology but a religion which gave rise to a great civilisation, and has its own fundamental values. Islam, basically arose in an urban setting, and in view of inter-tribal disputes it laid great stress on unity and brotherhood of all (all believers are brothers and sisters [10:49]; the word *ikhwatun* being inclusive of both genders).

Yet, a lust for power, divided Muslims and caused serious enmities. The *Quran* stresses non-discriminatory behaviour between one tribe and another, one ethnic group and another, whereas power struggles were based on these very divisions. As opposed to that, civilisations are built on cooperation between all groups, not fighting among them. The other foundational values of Islamic civilisation are truth, justice and compassion.

These values were actually practised by the sufis on the one hand, and ordinary Muslims on the other. The sufis never allowed Islam to be reduced to a political ideology and kept away from divisive politics. As opposed to power, they emphasised love, another civilisational value. Great Sufi masters like Muhiyuddin Ibn Arabi and Maulana Rumi believed in the power of love and persuasion instead of power per se.

A power struggle brings about what Prof Huntington has theorised as a 'clash of civilisations'. The US Right needed an enemy after the collapse of communism and hence they invented one in the Islamic civilisation. The former reformist president of Iran, Mohammad Khatami, instead gave a call for a dialogue of civilisations and proposed at a UN meeting to adopt it as its programme.

As against power, the sufis for ages carried on a dialogue with the people of other religious groups, with Jews, Christians, and Hindus in India. While kings and sultans grabbed power causing so much bloodshed, the sufis followed the Islamic civilisation's values and pursued the unity of people—Muslims as well as non-Muslims. Ibn Arabi even went to the extent of saying, "My Sharia and din is love."

The *Quran* also lays emphasis on pluralism. According to the *Quran*, Allah could have created one people but He created diversity and plurality so that He can test us and it is better to cooperate with each other in good deeds (5:48). Thus, rather than fighting, one should cooperate for good deeds, the basis on which all civilisations are built.

Today, the world again is torn by conflict, especially countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine and Yemen. These are the countries where various American interests are at stake, making brothers

kill brothers with bombs and acts of terror. Everyday scores die in these countries, taking them away from the path of civilisation.

What Muslims should concentrate on is their *fiqh*, bringing it in conformity with the spirit of the *Quran* rather than basing it on disputed historical literature. The *Quran*'s basic emphasis is on justice, especially gender justice, which in turn is the very basis of a great civilisation. Muslim societies desperately need gender equality by giving women their due. The *Quran* also emphasises the treading of the middle path, whereas we tend to go towards extremism in religion and politics.

The *Quran* has not addressed a single of its verses to kings or rulers but to the Prophet (PBUH) and the people in general, and believers in particular. If we establish the primacy of politics, it is the rulers who have to be responsible for everything whereas the *Quran* puts the primary responsibility on all believers who, in cooperation with other non-Muslim groups, should create a just and compassionate society. Thus, it demands of the believers to "cooperate with one another in righteousness and piety and help not one another in sin and aggression" (5:2).



Family and Modernity

Sometime ago, I happened to go to Turkey for an international conference on the topic, "Family". It was an impressive international conference of around 50 countries and 300 scholars, social scientists and activists. Several papers were read and discussed on various aspects of family. The common concern was that the institution of family is getting weakened and family being the very foundation of our civilisation must be saved from disintegration.

I was asked to talk about Islam and the institution of family. The Prophet of Islam did not approve of a life of celibacy except in some situations. He also disapproved of renunciation of the world (*ruhbaniyyah*) and preferred living in the world and facing all the situations. Various pronouncements of the *Quran* relate to family life, marriage, divorce and children. The *Quran* also says, if you have no means to marry and sustain your family, lead a pious life until Allah gives you the necessary means. The *Quran* prescribes also punishment for illegitimate sex, fornication, rape and adultery.

According to Islamic teachings, sex is permissible only within the institution of marriage as sex is basically meant for raising a family. Today, people do not want to take responsibility for raising a family

but want to have sex for pleasure and hence 'live in' arrangements have come into vogue. This concept of live-in relationships has dealt a great blow to the institution of family. In this arrangement both man and woman can walk away any time they like.

Thus, the basic idea is not to have any responsibility towards each other, much less towards children. In fact, every attempt is made to avoid begetting children and, if at all, children are born, the whole responsibility will come on a single parent, especially the mother. The result is man tries to have multiple partners to enjoy sex and woman is burdened with children and faces physical and psychological stress.

Sex cannot be an end in itself as it happens in a live-in arrangement. There are, according to the *Quran*, two important purposes of marriage – to raise a family and provide companionship to each other. The very philosophy of marriage is based on love and companionship. The *Quran* says, "And of His Signs is this, that He created mates for you from yourselves that you might find quiet of mind in them, and He put between you love and compassion. Surely there are signs in this for a people who reflect." (30:21)

Thus, the institution of family, according to the *Quran*, should be based on higher and noble values of life. The desire to simply gratify sexual desire can never lead to higher civilisation and stability in one's life. Stability, compassion and love are the very basis of human civilisation and family is an important institution in building civilisation. Family, as far as possible, should not break and that is why according to the Prophet's hadith, divorce is most disapproved of among permissible things. Also, according to another hadith, heavens shake when man pronounces divorce to his wife because divorce delivers blow to the very institution of family.

Today, in the contemporary world, institution of family is increasingly getting weakened due to certain contradictions arising in our life due to modernity. In modern period, women too work and become quite independent and hence refuse to bow down to wishes of the spouse. In the past women were economically dependent on husbands and felt readily bowed down to his wishes. The husband was thought

to be master of the family. Today women from middle class families are highly educated and work with high salaries and so they refuse to bow down before their husbands.

So many orthodox Muslims feel this is the result of women getting educated and earning for themselves. It is destabilizing families. This is a wrong conclusion because we are embedded in patriarchal values. In fact, if women have to have dignity and self-respect they should not be asked to submit to the husband's authority. Any institution based on authority rather than higher values cannot be stable and cannot lead to higher civilisation. The *Quran*, while giving women right to earn and property, also gives them equal dignity and self respect and makes it clear that family should be based not on authority of husband but on love and compassion for each other.

If these values are meticulously practiced, both husband and wife have mutual respect and consult each other before taking any crucial decision, woman's education and earning would make the family much more stable and prosperous. If our culture remains patriarchal and husband's authority supreme, the family in which woman is highly educated and cares for self respect and dignity, would tend to come under strain and break. Even in highly modern societies women have no role in decision making on crucial matters and hence family life comes under severe strain and percentage of divorce goes up because woman refuses to submit.

Thus, the solution does not lie in abandoning the institution of family and going in for live-in relationships; there will be no genuine love and compassion. The solution lies in according equal dignity to women and equal role in decision making. This alone will strengthen the institution of the family. Thus if philosophy of family as propounded by the *Quran* is followed the institution of family will not fall apart. It will be strengthened instead.



Religious Diversity and Tolerance

Diversity and tolerance are considered the very basis of modernity as one of modernity's fundamental principles is individual and community rights and also, as modernity implies democratic rule, tolerance and the right to pursue any ideology or religion assumes great importance. The western countries consider themselves as role models for democracy and freedom. Bush after the 9/11 attack often said why (read Muslims) are they jealous of our democracy and freedom?

Most of us believe in this myth that the West stands for freedom of conscience, democracy and liberty. In theory it is quite correct. But is it in practice? First of all, let us ask one question, did they ever consider non-Whites, non-Europeans equal? History tells us they didn't. The White superiority was always an underlying assumption and the Blacks (now known as African-Americans in the US) were always discriminated against. Even Jews, until the Second World War, did not enjoy equal rights. They were always discriminated against and forced to live in ghettos, apart from what Nazis did to them.

Until the Second World War when the western world was mono-religious and mono-cultural its tolerance for non-western religions and cultures was never tested. It is only when economic migrations began

from the erstwhile colonial countries that West began to experience what they now call multiculturalism and western society became multi-religious and multi-cultural.

It was then that strains appeared and we saw a number of cases of prejudice and discrimination against non-white, non-western people migrating to the West. The most recent case is of Switzerland voting to ban minarets for Muslim mosques. In the poll held, 57 per cent Swiss people voted against allowing minarets to Muslim mosques. In Switzerland close to four million people are Muslims.

It is heartening that *The New York Times* editorially condemned this proposed ban. It is worthwhile to quote excerpts from the editorial which was published on November 30, 2009, immediately after the referendum in Switzerland: "Disgraceful. That is the only way to describe the success of a right-wing initiative to ban the constitution of minarets in Switzerland, where 57 per cent of voters cast ballots for bigoted and mean-spirited measures."

Further the editorial says, "But the vote also carries a strong and urgent message for all Europe, and for all western nations where Islamic minorities have been growing in numbers; and visibility, and where fear and resentment of Muslim immigrants and their religion have become increasingly strident and widespread. The warning signs have been there: the irrational fierceness of official French resistance to the shawls and burkhas worn by some Muslim women; the growing opposition in many European quarters to Turkish membership in the European Union."

The New York editorial is, indeed the voice of sanity in the growing intolerance in the western world towards Muslims in particular and, non-western cultures and religions, in general. We would again like to reiterate here, that in principle the West does stand for equality, freedom of conscience and human rights which most of the Muslim countries have yet to learn. But, as we will show that Islam also stands for tolerance and respect for other culture and faiths and believes diversity is the creation of Allah but the test really comes in practice.

It is also true that terrorist attacks in some countries, and especially

after 9/11 have intensified hatred against Islam and Muslims but then in Switzerland, the Muslims have been peaceful and there have been no instances of such attacks. It appears quite irrational that people of Switzerland should display such intolerance towards their peaceful minority. However, the signs were in the air.

I had delivered a lecture on Islam and non-violence way back in 2004 in Zurich which was held in collaboration with the local church. When the question answer session began, the journalists present there asked, 'how Islam can ever be non-violent and peaceful?' I said I have based my speech on the Quranic text and anyone can verify what I have said but the journalists did not seem to be convinced. They kept on arguing until the church official intervened. What these journalists must have been writing about Islam is obvious. In modern society media plays a very important role.

This is further borne out by the TV debate between noted Swiss Muslim intellectual and my friend Tariq Ramadan and Oskar Freysinger on the ban on minarets. It became evident from the debate that the real issue was not minarets, but Islam itself. Dr Patrick Haenni, a researcher at Religiouscope, who believes that religion, not politics, was the core of the initiator's discourse through a perspective full of misconceptions and stereotypes.

The ban on the *burqa* in France by the Government is another instance of this intolerance for non-western religions and cultures. This writer is no advocate of *burqas* covering the entire body and face from head to toe but the question is not whether one should wear *burqa* or not; the more fundamental question is of individual right and choice? Whatever be the reason for wearing the *burqa* — personal conviction, social or peer pressures or identity — does one have a right to wear it or not? Should one ban it outright?

Here I would like to narrate an interesting experience. I was lecturing on secularism in the University of Bukhara and in the audience were mostly young women dressed in skirts like western women. During the lecture two *burqa* clad women (wearing *burqa* from head to toe) entered and sat down. After my lecture was over some of those women

stood up and agitatedly said 'sir, why should we not throw out these two women (wearing *burqa*)?' I was shocked at the aggressive tone of these agitated women.

I enquired why they wanted to throw them out? These women (all of them Muslim) asked why they were wearing *burqa* and why had they covered themselves. I said, "I ask you a simple question. Suppose all these women were clad in *burqa* and two of you had come wearing skirts, sporting a modern haircut. If they had to throw the two skirt-wearing women out, what would have been your response?"

Evicting or banning a practice is not the solution: dialogue is. They then appreciated my viewpoint and sat down quietly and we continued our discussion. Thus to accept others as they are is the essence of democracy and is the basis of modernity. Now it has been universally accepted that it is not only individual rights which are important but also group rights of minorities are equally important.

The West, whatever its principles and values, is yet to come to terms with the non-western people. Also, it should not depend on the doctrine of reciprocity but group rights should be absolute. I remember in the UK there was a debate in the 1980s on how Muslims treat Christian minorities in Muslim majority countries. Do they give them equal rights and freedom of religion? If not, why do they expect such rights in the West?

This reciprocal approach contradicts the very spirit of democratic values and principles. These values and principles are absolute and no conditions should be prescribed. Of course, there are complex reasons for the growing intolerance towards Muslim minorities in the western world. As everywhere, the rightist forces thrive on hatred of others and the ban on the minarets in Switzerland is also the result of rise of rightist politics. The Muslims in India too have experienced it when the BJP tried to come to power through the hate politics of *Ramjanmabhoomi*.

In France too, ban on the *hijab* came under the regime of Sarkozy who is a known rightist. Secondly, the rising number of immigrants also creates fear in the minds of original inhabitants of the country and, in order to press the issue, these numbers are highly exaggerated. Muslims,

both by way of migration and birth, are the fastest growing minority in Europe. Thirdly, most of the Muslim migrants are non-whites, many of them blacks from African countries and here both religious as well as racial prejudice combine and intensify hatred and intolerance.

In France, for example, most of the Muslim migrants are from former French colonies and hence happen to be black. Discrimination against them and their marginalization totally alienates them and this alienation finds expression through complex ways – through aggressive behaviour or overemphasis on their identities which in turn further intensifies their alienation.

And, if this is followed by economic crisis as Europe is undergoing these days, majority fear against the 'migrant other' becomes even more aggressive born out of fear and the rising tide of rightist forces in such circumstances further aggravates it. Also, the US policies in the Middle East have resulted in intensifying extremism in a section of youth in the Muslim countries resulting in terrorist attacks such as 9/11 which excites even more hatred against Muslims in the West.

What is the way out then? Now where to stop this vicious circle of action and reaction? For sure we cannot control all the factors. But it is also equally certain that we need a wise political leadership who is not after power but welfare of people. Democracy, ideally speaking is for people's participation and for their well being. However, like other political systems, democracy too, has become a means of grabbing power by certain groups and classes. Also, it tends to be majoritarian i.e. heavily tilted in favor of racial, religious or linguistic majority. There has been hardly any exception to this in the world.

Certain Muslim countries who swear by the *Quran* as their constitution also flagrantly violate the Quranic provisions. The *Quran* gives certain ideals and values for governance, an idea of the desirable society. It says diversity is Allah's creation and must be respected and celebrated. And this includes linguistic, racial and religious diversity. Human beings, whatever religion, race or linguistic group they belong to, must be accorded equal dignity which means all of them should enjoy equal rights.

However, you will not find any Muslim country swearing by the *Quran* as the book of Allah and implementing these ideals. You find discrimination on the basis of religion, even sects, language and ethnicity; for example in Saudi Arabia, against non-Arabs, non-Wahabi Muslims and against other ethnic and racial groups. One finds discrimination in Iran against Sunni Muslims, against Arabs, against Bahais and against non-Persians.

In Pakistan one finds discrimination against certain linguistic groups like Baluchis and Sindhis. It is dominated by the Punjabi majority. Not only that there is sectarian violence between Shi'ahs and Sunnis besides Christians and Hindus. It is Punjabi majority which rules the roost. One has yet to see any Muslim country which does not violate injunctions of the *Quran* while swearing by it. One has yet to see any western democracy not violating injunctions of their own constitutions enshrining ideals and values of modern democracy.

As long as the goal remains power, this is bound to happen. Another bane of the situation is current rise in rightist forces which arouse emotions of people on the basis of religion, race and language. No country is an exception to it. The education system itself, which prepares children and students for the future, is controlled by, in most, if not all cases, by rightist elements.

The Netherlands is also undergoing severe problem of anti-Muslim tirade. One politician made a film called *Fitna* and refused to take it back. A Muslim fanatic murdered a film maker from the Netherlands who caste a slur on Islam and this further led to anti-Islamic surge there. I met a professor of Islamic studies from Netherlands in Germany who spoke on Islam. The seminar was on progressive Islam.

I was stunned by his anti-Islamic outpouring. It was nothing short of hate-Islam speech. When we protested the organizers maintained that all views are allowed to be expressed in this forum. May be it was so. But what was a worrying factor was that this person was teaching Islam in the Netherlands. If such Islam is taught in universities of a country what mindset would be generated one shudders to think?

The media is no exception. While it must be made clear there are

honorable exceptions and some newspapers and TV channels are quite objective or tend to be so but then such papers and channels are, not very popular. They are read or watched by serious kind of people. Popular media tends to be prejudiced. Also, media is often owned by certain interests and it is not committed to the cause of objective reporting.

The Media plays a most crucial role in democracy. I would say if media plays responsible role, rising above all interests, modern democracies would be far more conflict-free than they are today. And in answering the question raised above, media provides one of the crucial factors. Despite all the laws made by the state, media behaves the way it wants to as various state organs fail to implement the laws.

It is true, we cannot have ideal democracy as the German philosopher rightly points out, 'ideal is not real and real is not ideal;' still one has to try to come as close to the ideal as possible. Even such efforts are lacking in modern democracies. Invariably, it is powerful interests which determine the shape and direction of things and there is always tension between vested interests and the ideals and interests seem to win.

Of course if the conflict remains manageable it is one thing but disaster takes place when it goes beyond manageable proportions. The attack on 9/11 and subsequent attack on Afghanistan and Iraq took this conflict between Islam and the West beyond all imaginable proportions as here too very powerful interests were involved. However, it would be wrong to consider it a self-fulfilment of Huntingtonian prediction of 'clash of civilisation'. It was, instead, clash of political interests on both sides.

It is interesting to note that Samuel P Huntington's book received such media attention in the West precisely because certain interests in the West wanted such a book written to promote conflict. Of course things may not have gone as planned but to an extent those interests were served but at a great social cost. It greatly sharpened prejudices in the West against Islam. And this has been going on for quite some time now.

Since Muslims began to immigrate to the western countries in the post-colonial period, the anti-Islam prejudices began to emerge. Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* in the 1980s and the support it received in the West was also part of this process. The enthusiastic support

was not for the sake of freedom of opinion; there was a purpose behind it. The Islamic revolution had occurred in Iran which was anti-West in its thrust.

The West adopted an anti-Iran posture and when Khomeini, for his own political compulsions, issued fatwa against Salman Rushdie, the swords were drawn on both sides. The West lent unqualified support to Rushdie in the name of freedom and Muslims stood by Khomeini's *fatwa*. It was neither freedom nor Islam but who would dominate Iran and its oil, West or the people and rulers of Iran.

All these developments through 1980s culminated in 9/11 attacks and everything was complete for anti-Islamic prejudices in western countries and media. As far as Arab oil is concerned the clashes are likely to continue and will go through different phases. It reached its culmination during Bush's unqualified support to rightist policies and outright adventure in West Asia.

However, before it crossed critical limits, Obama took over the reigns of administration. But it would indeed be too much to expect that Obama would resolve the conflict. But yes, certainly, he may succeed in managing the conflict a shade better and he appears to be sincerely trying. He is far from a free agent as many think. His hands are tied by so many uncontrollable factors.

Al Qaidah and Taliban issues will not disappear in a few years. The Afghan people are fiercely independence loving and even Muslim rulers like Moghuls failed to subdue them. American policy makers should study history of Afghan rebellion much more seriously than they have done. US jackboots cannot crush Afghans. Obama has, to an extent, realised this and though he is sending more forces he has also promised to withdraw by 2011.

Withdrawl or not, the solution does not lie in trying to crush Afghans but to resolve the issue through dialogue and accommodation which again is not easy. US is also not in Afghanistan just to wipe out Al-Qaidah and Taliban but to control the rich gas and mineral resources of Central Asia. It did not invade Afghanistan for nothing; and as long as the US wants to control rich resources of Central Asia, it cannot

find accommodation with Afghan Taliban and as long as Taliban issue continues, anti-Islam prejudices will remain as strong as ever.

It is also absolutely necessary to solve Palestinian problem if one desires peace in West Asia. While Afghan Taliban are more concerned about peace in their region, Al-Qaidah is more focused on West Asia and to solve both problems sans US interest in both the regions is asking for let us say the impossible. Should we despair then? Not really. But it is a challenge which few politicians can succeed in facing.

The Muslim countries too will have to seriously contemplate policy changes and make concerted efforts to project peaceful Islam on their part. They will have to fight powerful interests and confrontationists mindset. The rulers in West Asia have to go for modernization, changes in their education system and promoting the spirit of understanding and dialogue.

King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia is wiser than his predecessors and following strategies to contain extremist elements in his own country. Like Obama his hands too are tied. In Pakistan the military establishment is too powerful to be contained easily and for quite sometime to come, civilian rule will not be able to ascertain its independence and Pakistan is very crucial for peace in Afghan-Pakistan region.

Well, while working for greater understanding let us understand these challenges too.



No Sanction for Terrorism

The terrorist attacks in Mumbai and elsewhere have revived the question as to whether such strikes can be held permissible in Islam.

The Indian *ulama* have repeatedly denounced the killings. The Dar-ul-Uloom, Deoband, has issued a fatwa against terrorism on the ground that Islam does not permit taking innocent lives.

The *Quran* clearly says, "Whoever kills a person, unless it be for manslaughter or for mischief in the land, it is as though he has killed the entire humanity. And whosoever saves a life, it is as though he has saved entire humanity." (5:32). One can be permitted to take life for life, as it happens even today in many countries but it is only by way of retaliation (*qisas*). The *Quran* recommends an even higher form of morality, i.e. forgiveness, and Allah is described as forgiving and merciful (Ghafur al-Rahim).

Under no circumstances is the killing of innocent people allowed, much less in the name of Islam. Many Muslim terrorist groups are using the word jihad for their terror attacks and impression has gone round that Islam is all about killing *kafirs*. Terrorism has not even the remotest connection with Islam or with any religion for that matter. Terrorism is a political response to a political situation, and a most unwise response.

Jihad is not about killing. It should not be used for war; fighting an external enemy is only the minor jihad (*jihad-i-asghar*) at the most. The superior form of jihad is fighting the enemy within which takes various destructive forms – anger, revenge, falsehood, desire and greed. These are mean tendencies in us all.

To pardon (*afw*) and to suppress anger (*kazim al-ghayz*) are described as higher forms of morality. Thus, the *Quran* says, "Those who spend in ease as well as in adversity and those who restrain (their anger) and pardon men. Allah loves the doers of good (to others)". The friends of Allah (Auliyah Allah) always believed in this form of jihad which raised their moral stature above others.

Revengeful attacks to realise political objectives cannot be called jihad; it is such immoral acts which have caused Islam to be associated with violence and fanaticism. Let it be said with all emphasis that Islam is a religion of compassion; in fact, compassion is at the centre of Islam. The four most fundamental values of the *Quran* are: justice, benevolence, compassion and wisdom, which are also Allah's attributes.

Muslims begin all their work with the name of Allah, Who is Merciful and Compassionate. A Muslim who is not compassionate is not an obedient worshipper of Allah. Those who seek revenge, as terrorists do, are not good Muslims. Those who take innocent lives cannot qualify as Muslims obeying Islam. A Muslim should be a role model of morality for others. He should display wisdom at critical junctures in life.

The Prophet (PBUH) pardoned his worst enemies. When he conquered Mecca in a bloodless victory all his persecutors and oppressors feared the worst. However, he pardoned all of them, even Hind, who had chewed the liver of his dear uncle Hamza, causing the Prophet so much anguish. It is this compassionate conduct of the Messenger which attracted the people of Mecca to Islam. Jihad is the utmost effort to suppress all base tendencies within us to become fine human beings. The Prophet was indeed the *Rahmat-il Aalemin* (mercy to the worlds) which made him so dear to others that they were prepared to lay down their lives for him. Islam spread in the world because of the morality practised by its followers, not because of the sword.

But terrorists who are ruthless killers bring only contempt to Islam. Such 'Muslims' confirm the stereotype spread by the enemies of Islam that the faith spread in the world 'with the sword in one hand and the *Quran* in the other'. Ahmad Amin, the noted Egyptian intellectual, points out that Islam means 'to establish peace'. A Muslim is one who is engaged in spreading peace in the world. We also have a hadith that says: 'A Muslim is one from whose hands others are safe'.

No one is safe at the hands of the terrorists. In the recent Mumbai terror attack two terrorists were seen killing innocent passengers at the railway station who were with their families. In the carnage at the station 58 passengers were killed, of whom 22 were Muslims. In all, 35 Muslims were killed. Contrary to this, a Muslim is one who saves life of all, irrespective of their faith.

All Muslims must unreservedly condemn indiscriminate killings of innocent citizens, regardless of where or when they take place. Let us project an Islam which is compassionate and which respects the sanctity of life.



Training Ulema

Though there is no concept of priesthood in Islam, yet a class has come into existence which is known as *ulema* or clerics. In Islam any person, if he/she has adequate knowledge, can perform all the functions and rituals be it related to marriage, death or other obligations for Muslims. *Alim* (plural *ulema*) means one who knows. Thus, the whole emphasis is on knowledge of the *Quran* and hadith irrespective of class, caste, race or nationality. Since knowledge is central, this class came to be called *ulema*.

Now the question is what knowledge should be imparted to these persons who are supposed to guide the community. The *ulema* often quote a hadith that since Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is the last prophet, the *ulema* are like stars after him and Muslims should seek guidance from them as stars guide and become a source of light in the darkness of night.

Now in those days when the tribe of *ulema* began to come into existence the most important knowledge was that of the *Quran* and hadith which embodied total knowledge for guidance of the community. And in the island of Arabia which had no literary tradition before Islam, the *Quran* and hadith imparted revolutionary tradition of knowledge.

Anyone having that knowledge was counted among great *alim*. Also the *Quran* and hadith were main sources of shari'ah law so its knowledge was the main source of knowledge.

However, as Islam spread to other countries with old culture and civilisations and other sources of law, besides these ulema with their knowledge limited to the *Quran* and hadith, other types of ulema also came into existence i.e. those who acquired knowledge from other sources like philosophy, mathematics, physical sciences like optics, chemistry, physics, astronomy and so on. These ulema put emphasis on reason and rational sciences besides traditional sources like the *Quran* and hadith.

These rational sciences, over period of time became so important that they became sources of a syllabus for training of 'ulema and came to be known as *ulum al-agliyah* which mainly consisted of translations from Greek philosophy and other sciences. In those days Greek sciences were the most advanced ones and these rational sciences were supposed to broaden the vision of the ulema. They were thought to be so important that Socrates, whose disciple was Plato (Flatoon or Aflatoon), was thought to be one of the prophets.

Muslims produced great philosophers who contributed richly and whose commentaries on Greek philosophy were taught in European universities and Christian seminaries throughout middle ages. Thus the Christian priests studied al-Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicina), Ibn Rushd (Averros) etc. in their seminaries. Thus all kinds of rational sciences flourished during mediaeval ages in the Islamic world and Muslim *ulema* learnt these sciences.

Now these Greek sciences are mostly of historical importance and humankind has made tremendous progress in social and physical sciences. No one can claim to be an *alim* without knowledge of these contemporary developments. Unfortunately the colonial period and development of these sciences in Europe had to be simultaneous and since Muslim countries were victims of colonial rule, Muslims in general and the ulema in particular, became highly prejudiced against all Western or European sciences. Their source was mainly colonial.

Also, the Islamic seminaries while taking out their anger against

colonial masters, did not understand the difference between colonial rulers and scientists many of whom were themselves persecuted by the rulers. It is not the rulers who developed science but the scientists. Also these ulema by now considered traditional Greek philosophy and science as integral part of their religion which was totally wrong. These ulema had resisted Greek knowledge and many philosophers were persecuted but later they adopted and made these sciences part of their syllabus, and then of their religion.

Similarly they resisted modern social and physical sciences as irreligious, being imported from colonial West and rejected these *ulum*. However, later they began to accept these sciences but would not teach them in the Islamic seminaries. Still they teach traditional Greek sciences as if it is part of Islamic knowledge. Now it is high time that Islamic seminaries integrate, like Greek sciences earlier, part of syllabus in Islamic seminaries.

Today, the whole emphasis in these seminaries is on traditional sciences and theological issues which is of course necessary but only as a part of training. Along with these theological issues they must train the students in these seminaries in modern social and physical sciences which will greatly help broaden their vision. They should also be trained in reinterpreting the *Quran* so that it can embrace modern knowledge. The earlier commentaries and interpretations were done in the light of knowledge which was available then. One cannot continue to teach the same *tafsir* (commentary) as if not only the *Quran* but also the *tafsir* literature is divine. While the *Quran* is divine, *tafsir* is entirely human effort to understand it within the parameters of available knowledge.

The existing hadith literature comprises both authentic and doubtful accounts of the life and times of the Prophet (PBUH). The students must be trained in modern method of critiquing the existing hadith literature and rigorously select only those which are authentic and in keeping with reason. Integrity of the narrator is not enough; it should also fulfil the criterion of reason. Reason and intellect are divine gifts and the *Quran* recognises the role of 'aql (reason).

Also, in these *madrassahs*, sectarianism is flourishing and so there is

great need for future *ulema* to learn the value of tolerance and moderation. The fundamental values of the *Quran* truth (*haq*), justice ('*adl*), doing good (*ihsan*), compassion (*rahmah*) and wisdom (*hikmah*) must be taught and emphasized. Also, knowledge of comparative religions must be imparted which is highly necessary in the modern pluralist world. Only such a comprehensive syllabus will produce future *ulema*.



Five Suggestions for the Islamic World

There is no doubt that the Islamic world is far behind rest of the world so far as education, science and technology are concerned. Except a few oil rich Arab nations, most Islamic countries are poverty and illiteracy stricken.

Here we propose five suggestions which can be debated and discussed by Muslims and modified so that they can achieve some status among the nations that are relatively better off. Muslims have a tendency to invoke past glory and what they had achieved during Abbasid period in the field of philosophy, science and technology. It is quite natural that when we have nothing to show in the present, we, in order to hold our head high, invoke past glories. However, this does not help.

Before we discuss these suggestions, I would like to stress here that we Muslims are too pre-occupied with theological issues and rush to the ulema for *fatwas*, even in fields where they have no skills to guide us. This is again because of poverty and illiteracy of Muslim masses in the Muslim world. Unfortunately, the ulema that are trained only in purely theological issues – and theology which was evolved during mediaeval ages, dominate the Islamic world. That is why so many *fatwas* are issued. The Saudi King had to issue an order restraining ulema from

issuing *fatwas* which become subject of controversies and media focus. Too many fatwas of mutually contradictory nature are issued, which hardly help resolve modern complicated issues. Islam does not encourage priesthood and certainly not institutionalized priesthood. Despite this, it is thriving in the Islamic world. Progress can happen only when knowledge ceases to be the monopoly of few ulema and Islamic theology also ceases to be stagnant pool and continues to evolve as a living and dynamic entity.

Education

My first suggestions in this respect is that the Islamic world commit itself to the spread and consolidation of education. The Muslim nations must compulsorily spend atleast 2 to 3 per cent of their gross national product on education. The very first aim should be universal literacy. Investment in primary education pays very rich dividends later. Higher education is not possible without primary education. There should be special emphasis on female education as literacy among women is far less than among men.

Also, Muslim nations are far behind in the fields of science and technology. At one time, the West used to learn from Muslims. Today it is the Muslim world which is totally dependent on the Western world. This reversal needs to be reversed again. It would be no exaggeration to say that Muslim world is most backward as far as progress in science and technology is concerned. Today every nation tries to build centers of excellence. No Muslim country can boast of such centres of excellence in academia and especially in the field of science and technology.

Even a country like India has made tremendous progress in science and technology compared to the Muslim world, does not have a university which can rank among the 100 best universities of the world. But that does not mean that Muslim countries should not endeavor to develop one. Today oil rich Arab countries spend millions of dollars in buying weapons from America and other Western countries but shy away from spending on education of their own people.

The Western countries exploit these oil rich nations in two ways;

they make super profit by selling these weapons to them and also use these weapons ultimately for their own security in the middle east by establishing military bases. One does not understand why these Arab nations need such sophisticated weapons? Who are they securing themselves against? Do they expect fellow Arab nations to attack them? If not, why do they need such weapons on which they spend such massive amounts?

Buying such weapons is not only a criminal waste of precious resources but it also amounts to helping Western countries and their armament industries which in turn get stronger and ultimately help the West to tighten its noose around the Arab world and help Israeli Zionists. One has to break this vicious circle by refusing to buy these weapons and develop weaponry indigenously what is absolutely essential for minimum defense. Also, this money should be spent instead on fighting illiteracy and on higher education.

Let us remember, no Muslim country has ever won the Nobel prize in sciences whereas when Muslim scientists like Abdus Salam, go and work in the US they get the prize. There is no research worth the name in science and technology and no facilities for talented scientists in these countries. Let it be resolved by these countries that in the coming quarter of a century at least one of their citizens would be at least nominated for Nobel in the field of science. Also, that at least one of the countries in West Asia would develop centre of excellence in learning and attract people from all over the world for studies.

If Dubai can become a huge international market, why can't one of the countries in that region become an excellent centers of learning and attract students, researchers and teachers from all over the world, too? It should not be impossible as it appears today. After all, Muslims have been precursors of knowledge in the world. And the *Quran* lays so much emphasis on '*ilm* (knowledge).

Unfortunately, for Muslims '*ilm* in the *Quran* has come to mean only theological and other worldly knowledge and not '*ilm* about worldly matters. In the *Quran* there is an invitation for believers to think about Allah's wonderful creation, about nature, about earth and whole universe

and it also emphasizes inductive, as against deductive methodology. Deductive methodology hardly adds to our knowledge whereas the inductive one, which was used by Francis Bacon in the West, develops new knowledge of nature. In the 21st century the Islamic world should consider it its duty and commitment to the *Quran* to develop as center of excellence in knowledge and come out of its obsession with theological controversies. Its commitment to the *Quran* has to be much deeper and wider than theology, *tafsir* and hadith.

Religious freedom and tolerance

The *Quran* has made freedom of conscience as divine attribute of Allah. As the story of Adam narrated in the *Quran* mentions, Allah gave freedom even to Satan to mislead human beings. He gave freedom to Adam and his progeny to choose between what is right and what is wrong and only warned both of consequences either way. It is only for Allah to punish or reward, not for any human being. However, today we find Muslims most intolerant in matters of religion.

The fatwa culture in the Islamic world has become a curse for Muslims. On petty matters of theology or jurisprudence *fatwas* of *kufir* are issued. Injunctions are issued to renew one's Islam and even renew one's *nikah*. There are acute prejudices against other religious sects and against non-Muslims. This is all, as pointed out above, because of tremendous influence, even disproportionate influence wielded by traditional theologians on Muslim masses.

This is also because of secular education and over emphasis on *madrassah* and religious education. Also, partly responsible is poverty among Muslim masses. These, needless to say, are inter-related matters. One strengthens the other. Traditional ulema's influence must be contained and restricted to strictly theological matters. Religious tolerance should be accepted as a Islamic duty. As mentioned in the *Quran* in Adam's story and repeated in several places, punishment or reward in doctrinal matters should be left to Allah.

No 'alim should be allowed to pronounce who is *kafir* and who is on the right or wrong path. Also, mutual sectarian differences are so

deep and wide that every other sect for these ulema is on wrong path and would be assigned to hell. In countries like Pakistan where terror culture is widespread, every *kafir* should be killed. Shias are being massacred and Ahmadias and Wahabis kill Barelvis. Where will it lead us to?

In all our *madrassahs*, religious intolerance is taught as Muslims of other sects are denounced as on wrong path and students even encouraged to go for mediaeval type of *munazaras* (i.e. polemics) and denouncing other sects. Thus intolerance is built in the very system of religious education today. This must be totally abolished. This is not my opinion but the opinion of many educational experts in Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries. When terrorist activities were at their climax, many educational experts from Middle East had expressed this opinion.

What is needed is a new breed of ulema that can rise above such narrow sectarian approach and who have deeply reflected on the *Quran* in the light of modern developments in different fields. They should transcend and go beyond mediaeval theology. The scope of theology should not be limited to matters of otherworldly beliefs as life in this world in Islam is equally important.

We must realise that theology developed by the great theologians of mediaeval ages was in response to their needs and situation. We should also understand that theology is a human endeavour as if in partnership with divine and human needs and endeavours can never be eternal. The greatest problem of Islamic world today is that we are treating past theology as eternal as the *Quran* itself. As long as we do this we will never change and this is one of the challenges before us. We should not remain stagnant.

We must make our theology dynamic and responsive to modern challenges. Today Muslim theologians must come forward and lead the world in this respect by developing new theologies like theology of peace, theology of environment, liberation theology, third world theology and so on for which the *Quran* provides eminent guidance. This writer has tried to develop theology of liberation and theology of peace. When one reads the *Quran* and reflects on its verses in the light of these challenges

one is wonderstruck and begins to think the *Quran* is indeed a divine miracle. Unfortunately Muslim theologians are so caught in the past that they are unable to realise the importance of the *Quran*.

For what is needed is religious freedom and tolerance. Religious freedom is very fundamental to the *Quran* and no genuine faith (*imaan*) is possible without genuine freedom of conscience. Today, we hardly find religious freedom in the Islamic world and it is one of the causes of our stagnation. The moment one exercises such freedom one attracts Fatwa of *kufr*. Our great institutions of Islamic learning like al-Azhar of which one can justly proud suffer from the same problem. When one of its great scholars Abu Zaid Nasir tried to understand *tanzil* and *tawil* (revelation and understanding revelation by human beings) he was immediately declared *kafir* and even his marriage was declared invalid and he had to flee from Egypt.

Earlier, Prof Fazlur Rahman from Pakistan, who also was a great scholar of Islam, had to leave Pakistan and go to Chicago and teach there. This is how we treat our great scholars, who try to develop new theological outlook and contribute richly to our Islamic heritage. Islamic world can never develop until we break the stranglehold of traditional ulema who have powerful vested interests in perpetuating what is past.

Women's status

Another problem with Islamic world is status of women which is also the result of our stagnant theology. In case of women, Muslims are very strong in rhetoric but very weak in practice. Muslims never tire of asserting that Islam gives women equal rights and high status but the record of Islamic world in empowering women is very poor. In fact Islamic world's record in respect of women's status is one of the poorest in the world. For years modern education was taboo for them.

Now after great struggle they have won some rights including going to schools and colleges. Even this is not free of problems in many Muslim countries. In Afghanistan even today, the Taliban burn their schools and throw acid if they do not cover themselves from head to foot. In tribal areas of Pakistan in North-West the same fate is in store

for women. In Saudi Arabia too they have won some rights after great deal of struggle and still their problems are tremendous.

Though the present king is more enlightened and is encouraging modern education for women but the situation is far from satisfactory. Women cannot drive a car, go alone from home, cannot do their own business and representation of women in work force is just 17 per cent. They have to cover themselves from head to foot while going out. They cannot vote in municipal elections. In many Muslim countries apart from ones mentioned above the situation is not very different. *Hijab* is purely cultural and has not even been mentioned in the *Quran*, let alone been made obligatory. Yet *hijab* is being enforced more and more in all Muslim countries. It is not a healthy sign. Muslim societies are highly patriarchal. There are very few women who can make independent decisions and can assert rights over their own bodies and affairs.

The *Quran* again is the first scripture which gave women not only equal rights but also liberated them from man's authority and made them absolutely independent legal and individual entities fully autonomous in every respect. But in entire Muslim world women have failed to achieve such a status. On the contrary women are utterly dependent on man's authority and can hardly exercise any independent authority.

There is, therefore, great need for liberation of women in the Muslim world; giving them freedom, individuality and dignity given them by the *Quran*. If our women do not progress our community cannot. We must realise that women are half the population and try keeping half the population backward how can the entire community progress? Many Muslim women have shown they are great achievers and given opportunities are not behind anyone. Thus if we give them their rights and full freedom, a great potential of energy pent up so far, will be released and Muslim *ummah* will be in for great achievements.

Democracy and human rights

Like our record on women's status the record on democracy and human rights is equally woeful. There is great lack of democracy in Muslim

countries except for a few. It is because of this that ignorant scholars maintain there is no place for democracy in Islam or that Islam and democracy are antagonistic. Far from it. There is nothing in Islamic teachings which can go against democracy. Islam is as democratic as any religion can or cannot be.

In fact, it is feudal culture and feudal authority inherited by Islamic world that keeps democracy out of Islamic world, and western imperialism and its interests are more responsible for this than Islam. The Western countries have kept feudal rulers in power in most of the Muslim countries to serve their own oil interest. Regimes are highly oppressive and violate elementary human and democratic rights of their citizens. When this happens in regimes supported by America, they conveniently overlook it but launch offensive propaganda if the regime happens to be defiant of the Western interests.

The best examples are from Iraq and Iran. Both countries have defied US interests and authority in the region and America sent its troops to Iraq on the false pretext of 'weapons of mass destruction'. They destroyed the whole country killing more than half a million of its innocent citizens. The US is also a sworn enemy of Iran though it can hardly do to Iran what it could to Iraq for a number of reasons.

Apart from what are American interests, the Muslim world has to see that authoritarianism does not thrive in Muslim world and democracy and human rights are ensured to its citizens and they can live with full dignity and prove to the world Islam is as democratic as any modern political system. It is high time the Muslim world overthrew all authoritative regimes or that kings and sheikhs become only nominal heads and power went into the hands of people.

All that has been suggested above is possible to achieve only when there are democratic regimes responsible and accountable to their people. Today in countries like Egypt any protest is put down ruthlessly and one person is made to win elections. This is highly undesirable. America forgets all its obligations to human rights and democracy because Mubarak regime is subservient to American interests.

Intra-religious unity

There are very sharp sectarian divisions among Muslims throughout the world though again here also there is empty rhetoric of unity of *ummah*. In another article we have examined in depth the reasons for these differences but here we would suggest that Muslims must put pressure on their leaders to sit down and talk to followers of other sects in the spirit of dialogue and promote unity at one level while adhering to ones belief with full freedom, on the other.

It is a minimum requirement to cease the violent and physical attacks as is happening in the Muslim world today especially in Pakistan. Pakistan, unfortunately has become a battle ground for such sectarian fights due to powerful interests involved. Mutual polemics must stop forthwith denouncing each other as *kafirs*. In India, as it is a democratic and secular country, all Muslim sects coexists; peace fully though occasional denunciations do take place.

Thus if democratic and human rights culture develops in Muslim world, intra-religious differences can also be minimized and peaceful co-existence can become possible. This can be further ensured with modern education and rational outlook. As suggested above the whole *madrassah* culture also has to change and moderation and tolerance of mutual differences should be made an integral part of *madrassah* education.



Origin of Islam: Socio-economic Perspective

One might ask what has religion to do with socio-economic status of a country? Religion is spiritual in orientation and looks after spiritual needs of people. Quite true. It is as true of Islam as of any other religion. But a religion does not grow in vacuum. It also responds to circumstances in which it is born and grows. There are several verses in the *Quran* regarding life in this world and its needs.

If material needs are to be taken into account socio-economic perspective cannot be ignored. Life in Mecca, at the time of birth of Islam, both material as well as spiritual, was totally anarchic. Neither there existed any revealed scripture nor was there any standard of justice and morality. Also, Mecca was an important commercial and financial centre of international magnitude.

The socio-economic malaise was as much widespread as spiritual and this vacuum had to be filled by some system which could do maximum welfare to the people. Islam emerged as a perfect response and its moral and ethical standards responded to the unsatisfactory situation prevailing there. However, soon powerful vested interests took over and Islam was reduced to merely a spiritual force, and worldly affairs were split from it.

Once it happened the balance was never restored. As far as worldly affairs were concerned the *Quran* placed justice ('*adl*) at the centre. The other word for justice used in the *Quran* is *qist*. Justice is so important and central to the Quranic ethics and morality that one of Allah's names is '*Adil* (Just). Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) also used to say that he would not give it up even if someone gave him hundred red camels in exchange (red camels were considered most precious in those days).

Thus one can understand the importance of a just system in Islam and any socio-economic system developed in Islamic society could not be devoid of justice. It was for this reason that many great thinkers, including poet Iqbal maintained that communism plus God is Islam as communism was thought to be godless. In a way Islam's socio-economic perspective is most modern which no religion before it or after it had developed.

What is most important is to note that the *Quran* does not call it by name as ideologies can change and can be subject to changes. It does not call it communism or capitalism or any other '*ism*' but simply puts justice at the centre and justice being value, can never change. This way one finds flexibility in the system i.e. one can take elements from different systems subject to retaining central value i.e. justice. Capitalism has seen its worst crisis and communism also collapsed in Russia but justice as a value remains unscarred. On the contrary, it becomes stronger with human awareness.

One should see Islam's socio-economic perspective in terms of justice. It is also to be noted that justice should be understood in all its comprehensiveness. It should not be limited to economic matters alone. The Quranic terminology for justice, as pointed out before, is '*adl*' and *qist* and both mean a balanced system which avoids excesses on either side. Thus the system should be so balanced that it would not deprive anyone of his/her rights or what is due to him or her. Any deprivation of rights would amount to injustice.

Matters of justice have been dealt with at different levels in the *Quran*: 1) '*adl* in *shahadah* (i.e. bearing witness). One should be very honest while narrating what one saw or knew about when one is called upon to bear witness. One should bear witness honestly even if it goes

against oneself or ones parents or relatives (4:135); 2) economic injustice: The Prophet (PBUH) strictly prohibited any exploitation and even condemned share-cropping and required believers to give away the land to cultivators if one does not cultivate land; 3) prohibited speculative selling or buying, for example selling the crop which has not matured or unmatured fruits on tree or deals by throwing stones.

Fourth level is justice in payment of wages. Thus according to one hadith, pay wages to the hired worker before his sweat dries up and it is not only question of payment but just payment. It is narrated in one of the hadiths that an owner of the orchard brought a child to the Prophet (PBUH) accusing him (the child) of theft of fruit and requesting the Prophet to cut off his (child's) hands. On enquiry the Prophet found that the child was under-paid and hence was hungry and so he stole fruit to satisfy his hunger. The Prophet told the owner, 'not his (child's) but your hands should be cut off as you have stolen his wages.' He asked him to pay proper wages and take care of the child giving him proper education.

Fifth level is profiteering hoarding and accumulation. Such practices have been strongly condemned both in the *Quran* and in hadith literature. These practices are main causes of exploitation and hence injustices. One must avoid injustices at all these levels. Then sixth level is of honesty in measuring or weighing commodities while selling and buying (17:35; 26:182)

Also, the chapters 104 and 107 strongly condemn depriving the poor of their small needs and accumulation of wealth. It is very strong denunciation indeed, showing deep concern by the *Quran* for socio-economic justice. This is precisely what was happening in Mecca while the Prophet was preaching there. The tribal chiefs were indulging in exploiting the poor and needy in order to increase their wealth and thinking wealth would give them eternal life and happiness.

It is important to note that Islam does not ban private property *per se* but strongly condemns private property acquired through exploitative means depriving others of their just rights and by indulging in unfair and unethical means. Islamic economy is essentially need based and

not greed based. Luxury is disapproved of and believers are advised to give away in the way of Allah (i.e. to poor and needy) what is left after meeting ones own basic needs (2:219). The *Quran* also condemns accumulation of wealth see verse 9:34.

All this leaves one in no doubt about the just socio-economic system of Islam. However, ideals and teachings are one thing and its implementation in practice some thing else. The real test comes in practicing what one preaches and the *Quran* repeatedly says why don't you do what you say. There is always a clash between ideals and interests and more often than not interests win and ideals lose out.

Islam also met with the same fate. Initially there were strongly committed Muslims who tried to implement Islamic ideals with ruthless honesty. But these companions of the Prophet were also confronted with strong political and economic interests. Companions of Prophet like Hazrat Umar, Hazrat Ali and Abu Dhar Ghifari were determined to implement Islamic concept of justice, particularly in eliminating poverty and distribution of wealth.

Hazrat Umar, for example, used to say even if a dog goes hungry in my regime, I will be responsible to Allah on the day of judgment. He would often go out at night to see whether anyone was going hungry. He also refused to change land policy allowing fertile lands of conquered regions with that of Mecca and Madina which would have created very powerful vested interests in land depriving future generations of an important resource.

However, Hazrat Usman gave in to pressure and changed the land policy which upset the economic balance maintained during Umar's rule. Similarly, Abu Dhar Ghifari did not spare anyone who acted against the Quranic ideals of justice and distribution of wealth. It is said he refused to shake hands with anyone who hoarded wealth and did not live a need-based life. A person was often judged by the fact whether Abu Dhar shook hands with him or not. Such was his honesty and character.

Abu Dhar was strongly opposed to accumulation of wealth and would cite the Quranic verse "And those who hoard up gold and silver (i.e. dinar and dirham) and spend it not in Allah's way – announce to

them a painful chastisement." (9:34). Even Mu'awiyah, with his diplomacy and money power could not win over Abu Dhar.

Hazrat Ali's commitment to Islamic justice was so strong that Hazrat Umar used to say, had there been no Ali, Umar would have perished. Hazrat Umar would consult him in all matters of just economic policies and try to implement them. Hazrat Ali's letter to Malik Ashtar on governance is a classic one and is as valid as it was when he wrote to Malik after appointing him governor of Egypt. Among other things he writes in this epistle about the poor as follows:

"Beware! Fear God when dealing with the problem of the poor who have none to patronize, who are forlorn, indigent and helpless and are greatly torn in mind – victims of the vicissitudes of time. Among them are some who do not question their lot in life notwithstanding their misery, do not go about begging. For God's sake, safeguard their rights; for on you rests the responsibility of protection. Assign for their uplift a portion of the state exchequer (*Bait al-mal*), wherever they may be, whether close at hand or far away from you. The rights of the two should be equal in your eyes. *Do not let any preoccupation slip them from your mind; for no excuse whatsoever for the disregard of their rights will be accepted by God.* (emphasis added)"

Continuing further he writes, "Do not treat their interests as of less importance than your own, and never keep them outside the purview of your important considerations, and mark the persons who look down upon them and of whose conditions they keep you in ignorance." Further Ali gives instructions to Malik Ashtar how to select officials to take care of the poor.

All this shows deep concern of Ali for the poor. He also suggests various steps, to take care of the poor and weak. The *Quran* itself is partisan to the weaker sections of society and despises the powerful and arrogant and wants to make the weak, inheritors and leaders of this world. (28:5). That is why those strongly committed to Allah's desire were so careful about the plight of the poor and did everything possible to mitigate their plight.

However, few are sincere in their commitment. In every successful

movement three categories of people swell its ranks: 1) those who are sincerely attracted towards its ideals and values; 2) those who see an opportunity in it for their own success and 3) those who join the movement just because it is being joined by others; they simply surrender before the inevitable. But those who see an opportunity for themselves represent vested interests and try to hijack the whole movement for their own interests.

All these categories of people happened to join the Islamic movement also, which was one of the most successful movements within a few years of its origin. It swept large parts of the world within thirty years of its origin. We have already talked of those who were very sincerely committed to Islamic values and ideals like Umar, Ali, Abu Dhar Ghifari and several others. These names are only representative, not exhaustive.

Many Bedouin tribes first resisted Islamic movement but joined it when they saw there was no other way and even tried to renounce Islam after the death of Prophet (PBUH). They refused to pay *zakat* and Hazrat Abu Bakr had to fight what was known as 'war of Riddah' in Islamic history. But when they lost they became part of Islam never to return back. Had the war of Riddah succeeded, most of the tribes would have renounced Islam. But that was not to be.

Then there were those, who saw an opportunity in exploiting Islam for their own benefits. A section of Umayyads belonged to this category. For their own interests they captured Islamic movement and undid all that Islam had stood for. With Umayyads capturing power the institution of *khilafat* ended and institution of monarchy began. Yazid was thus the first monarch in the history of Islam.

Imam Husain, another person strongly committed to Islamic ideals, tried to resist this attempt to exploit Islam for ones own vested interests, giving birth to people who paid lip service to Islam but behind it fulfilled their own lust for power. Yazid, Mu'awiya's son, was hardly interested in Islam and violated all Islamic values and ideals. Husain himself was not after power but tried to resist what he thought un-Islamic practices. But unfortunately the people of kufa, who had invited him to lead them in

insurrection against Yazid betrayed him and Husain was martyred in Kerbala along with his 72 followers.

A section of Umayyads, who tried to hijack Islam for their own political ambitions, became hyper-active during Hazrat Usman's time taking advantage of his leniency. Hazrat Umar and Hazrat Ali were very strict in enforcing Islamic value of justice but Hazrat Usman was of very different nature and did not prevent his relatives and co-tribesmen from taking advantages.

In fact Ahmad Abbas Salih, a scholar of Egypt, maintains in his book *Al-Yamin wa al-Yasir fil Islam* (The Right and Left in Islam) that Hazrat Umar and Hazrat Ali, in today's political terminology belonged to the left and Hazrat Usman to the right. He also says that had Umar and Ali come together in the earlier phase after the death of Holy Prophet, forces of justice would have been much stronger Hazrat Umar's land policy was based on his foresight.

Hazrat Usman changed this land policy under pressure from vested interests and that created class polarization and hence led to deep unrest and rebellion against Hazrat Usman's regime. He was ultimately assassinated. This turmoil was created because the conquests which brought unimaginable amount of wealth on one hand, and fertile land, on the other developed vested interests who sought to sabotage forces of justice in early Islamic society.

This also shows that it is not easy to bring change in any society as a few vested interests acquire so much power that they can stop any meaningful change. All the great religions in the world like Buddhism, Christianity, Islam etc. came with this mission but were soon hijacked by powerful vested interests. These religions became powerful establishments and to protect the establishment became more important than the religion itself since the establishment was obviously controlled by these interests.

Islam was no exception to this rule. All these religions are ritualized i.e. perform certain rituals, celebrate certain festivals. You are judged to be religious whether you imbibe the basic values or not becomes absolutely secondary or unimportant. The Quranic values also lost their

significance once Umayyads took over power. Yazid himself had gone back to pre-Islamic period i.e. days of ignorance (*jahiliyyah*).

The whole life style of the ruling class changed. Mu'awiyah was governor of Syria and Yazid changed the capital to that city, far away from Islamic centres of Mecca and Madina. It not only went away physically from the centre of Islam but also spiritually from Islamic values. Islam never returned to its Prophet's days and caliphate period in terms of rigorous following of Islamic teachings and values.

Kerbala was the last attempt to restore Islamic values but it did not succeed as the whole structure of power had decisively shifted in favour of monarchy and a ruling hierarchy had developed. Some attempts later, here and there, were too insignificant and now major players were Umayyids and Abbasids and both were not interested in the value system of Islam but in grabbing power.

It is interesting to note that Umar bin Abdul Aziz tried to restore Islamic values. Had he succeeded the vested interests would have lost their grip over power and hence they quietly poisoned him. He was becoming an obstacle for the ruling classes in promoting their interests. The earliest respondents to Islam were some youth like Hazrat Ali, women, slaves, other weaker sections of society and of course some rich merchants like Hazrat Abu Bakr and Hazrat Usman.

These people were attracted by Islamic values and hence became strong followers of the Prophet (PBUH). They had no vested interest and Islam had nothing to offer them materially but, on the contrary, demanded sacrifices which they readily offered. Islam was, it will be seen, a movement for empowering weaker sections of society and all the initial surahs (chapters) of the *Quran* strongly condemned accumulation of wealth and neglect of poor, needy, widows and orphans. It is indeed a very powerful denunciation.

Persons like Abu Dhar Ghifari further strengthened revolutionary spirit of Islam by deeply imbibing Islamic values as pointed out above. But as Islam began to succeed some people began to join it not because they were attracted by its value system but because they saw an opportunity to enhance their own interests in one way or the other. When

the number of such people began to increase, the quality of believers was also affected.

During the Prophet's lifetime, despite some such elements who have been described by the *Quran* as hypocrites (*munafiqun*), Islam never swerved from its revolutionary path and the quality of believers was far superior. But with conquests of far flung territories, wealth flowed on one hand, and, on the other, it attracted converts who had not spent their time with the Prophet and were alien to the original spirit of Islamic values.

These people from Syria, Egypt, Iran and Central Asia entered Islam for their own convenience and not for conviction. Hence the quality of believers began to go down in ever larger numbers. Now no one had to sacrifice in order to join Islam. It now became very difficult to recapture the early spirit of Islam. Also, Islam was structured into tribal equality but Iranian and Byzantine social structures were feudal and hierarchical and hence quite alien to equality as a value.

When Islam came to countries like India it also acquired its caste system in addition to values of ruling classes who distanced themselves from the poor and low caste Muslims. The regional civilisational and cultural values became part of Islam in that region. Without studying these deeper influences one cannot understand Islam in proper socio-economic perspective.

After conquests of vast territories of Iran and Byzantine Empires, wealth unseen before began to flow in. Arabs, especially Bedouins, had never seen so much wealth. Such excessive flow of wealth in a short period of time, greatly affected the programme of social justice. The very structure of society began to change. As per the tribal rule the wealth taken from conquered territories was distributed among soldiers who participated in the military campaign. As the wealth was looted from kings and governors and army generals, it was much in excess of even what rich merchants of Mecca, on the eve of emergence of Islam had seen.



Why Ummah Wahidah Remains only an Emotional Slogan

For the past 1,400 years, we have heard a slogan; one Allah, one Prophet and one *Quran*, and so all Muslims should unite and constitute one *ummah*. Also, interestingly enough our *ulema* narrate a hadith from Prophet (PBUH) that “my *ummah* will be divided into 72 sects and only one of them will be *naji* i.e. will achieve liberation and others will be doomed”. Thus, we contradict ourselves. On the one hand, we desire unity and on the other we go on dividing the *ummah* in 72 sects conflicting with each other.

The fact is that Baghdadi, by the end of second century hijrah, wrote a book *Al Farq Bayn al-Firaq* (Difference between Different Sects) and gives more description of more than 100 sects among Muslims by that time. In fact we should understand that emotional slogans will never bring unity and the more we raise such slogans, the more we will stand divided. In fact, differences among Muslims—political, social, economic and cultural – began not too long after the death of the Prophet (PBUH).

The conquests, if anything, made the situation much more complex, bringing in more power wealth and foreign influences which sharpened divisions, though it took some time for sects to formalize

and differences assume theological structure. In order to understand and analyze these differences, we have to go much beyond theology and try to understand the deeper causes.

First of all, we must understand that the message of Islam brought about a fundamental change in the then Arab society, of much deeper nature than we realise. It completely changed religious, moral, social and political structures and the Arab society could never be the same again. Yet the change was so rapid that Arabs could hardly absorb it. What was more tragic was that the Prophet (PBUH) also departed from the scene. He was the supreme guide who was listened to reverentially by all Muslims.

Muslims, for various reasons, turned outward rather than inward, to consolidate the gains of deeper Islamic revolution which could have been more beneficial to the nascent Muslim society. The most fundamental message of the *Quran* was moral and to bring in equality and justice in the society. The *Quran* repeatedly emphasizes importance of '*amal salih* along with *iman* (faith or belief in Allah, His prophets and the Prophet, day of judgment and accountability)

Secondly the *Quran* gave a new vision of a just and egalitarian society with due emphasis on human dignity and freedom of conscience. It also found a new middle path in which both *ummah* and individual was important with freedom of conscience, which until then was unknown in the Arab society. The Arabs were highly tradition bound and deeply immersed in their respective tribal cultures.

Islam tried to usher in new culture which was deeply humane and universal rather than tribal. But it was not easy to liberate oneself from pre-Islamic traditions which Muslims themselves called culture of *jahiliyyah* i.e. culture of period of ignorance. Its influence was so deep that mere acceptance of Islam could not bring in deep transformation. It was in need of total social transformation.

The *Quran* had given Arabic language a new diction, both moral and literary, at which great Arab creative poets and others wondered and found themselves unable to match. This diction was not only full of creative beauty but also morally high as the Quranic vision was to create a new society and a new human being literally what the *Quran*

calls *mumin* a man of faith working for new vision. As Iqbal put it *mumin hai to naya jahan paida karr* (if you are a man of faith create new world and don't live in the old world).

This new human being of faith, would have accepted all the Quranic values of unity, human dignity, freedom of conscience, diversity, truth, compassion, equality, justice and great courage. But except a few companions of the Prophet (PBUH), there was no one dedicated enough to cultivate this new culture and sustain this new Islamic vision.

What was worse, the conquests further damaged this process as new alien values, mostly feudal and authoritarian in nature further damaged the whole process. Now emphasis was more on sharing state power and newly acquired wealth and splendour than fulfilling the Quranic moral vision. The visionary society received a serious set back. The Islamic society began to be polarized between those who were engaged in worldly pursuits and squabbling for power and those who engaged themselves in only matters spiritual and almost reduced themselves to recluses.

One more setback came with the coming into existence of the Umayyad Empire, which was highly repressive in nature and authoritarian and built more on the Roman model than inspired by Islamic values and vision. The Umayyads, deeply immersed as they were, in pre-Islamic *jahiliyyah* culture tried to revive pre-Islamic culture with emphasis on its poetry. *Kitab al-Ghina* was written based on pre-Islamic *jahiliyyah* poetry and became immensely popular.

This *jahiliyyah* culture's foundational values were simply worldly pleasure completely devoid of high moral values. One can argue, 'well what was wrong with it? after all it was rich Arab heritage and its revival a legitimate act'. This argument has of course some validity. After all, a powerful Arab empire had come into existence and it needed its own national cultural heritage to be proud of and to trace its own national and tribal roots.

But so far as our present concern about Islamic society, we are looking at it from altogether another perspective. What was tragic in this revival was revival of pre-Islamic culture. It only strengthened the tendency to seek pleasure and power and enjoy life, irrespective of what

kind of society Islam wanted to build up. Secondly, and more damaging, was that now this pre-Islamic language and diction became fashionable and even the Quranic words and their meanings were sought to be understood in the light of how they were used in pre-Islamic poetry.

In fact, the *Quran* had created a new language rich in its own meaning. Its diction was moral and revolutionary; to infuse new values in building a new society and the *Quran* used that new diction for this purpose. Now tragically pre-Islamic poetry became the basis of understanding the *Quran* and its meaning. I think it was a great calamity that pre-Islamic poetry constituted the very basis of understanding the *Quran's* meaning. To some extent it was perhaps inevitable but without being conscious of its consequences it caused serious damage to the vision the *Quran* was aiming at.

Third thing was the nature of theological debates which began to rage among theologians when the very moral foundation of Islamic revolution began to be weakened. Theological debates whether a human being is a free agent or divinely determined became supreme, in which the ruling class had very high stakes. If human person is divinely determined then Umayyad regime is also divinely willed and its oppressive and exploitative base cannot be challenged. After all it is divinely willed.

As we have pointed out, the *Quran* lays emphasis on freedom of conscience. Even *Shaytan* was granted freedom and allowed to choose not to bow before Adam. Now a human being was sought to be seen as a mere toy destined to act as per divine will. Theologians were polarized according to their political inclinations. Those who did not want to challenge Umayyad power sought refuge in this theological formulation and refrained from political activism and some even sought to benefit from being part of the ruling classes.

This is not to say that there were no ulema of great courage and moral integrity who refused to become part of ruling structure and engaged themselves in cultivating and promoting Islamic values and vision. But such were very few and far between.

Fourthly, the Abbasids, in order to challenge Umayyad power launched an underground movement with the help of Iranian dis-

contents, who were feeling marginalised with Arab supremacy in the political as well as cultural areas. They had embraced Islam but never became part of political and cultural processes. The Persians readily agreed to support the Abbasids who promised them substantial role in the political process. Abu Muslim Khorasani organized military and mass support in favour of Abbasids.

The Persians had their own proud cultural and political heritage and they looked upon Arabs with sheer contempt as uncouth and uncultured Bedouins. As soon as Abbasids captured power and Umayyads dethroned, many Persian wives slaughtered their Arab husbands. But this was not to last longer. The Abbasids were after all Arabs and they did not want to share political power, at least substantially with non-Arabs.

Thus the first thing they did was to get rid of Abu Muslim Khorasani, who had meticulously built the political basis of Abbasid power. But they were shrewd enough to reward Persians for their support in some other way. Many Persian intellectuals were appointed key bureaucratic posts to give them a sense of participation. Though not politically, they became dominant in intellectual and cultural fields.

This also had its own social and moral consequences. Great social and intellectual changes began take place in the very approach to Islam. The Mu'tazila movement acquired a new vitality under the Abbasid patronage and controversies like whether the *Quran* is created or uncreated broke out and Muslims were divided as never before on such intellectual issues. If the Umayyids encouraged controversy about human determination, Abbasid encouraged the controversy about created-ness or uncreated-ness of the *Quran*.

Both controversies, may or may not have had philosophical and intellectual importance, but helped divert attention from basic political social and economic issues. Theologians debated these issues and were polarized. Also, the Abbasids patronized translations of Greek books on philosophy into Arabic as well as from Persian and Indian sources and *Bait al-Hikmah* (the House of Wisdom) became centre of great intellectual ferment and enlightenment. Arabs began to lead in science, mathematics and technology and several other sciences.

It was indeed, a great intellectual contribution to the world by Arab and non-Arab Muslim thinkers, philosophers and intellectuals, mostly Persians. It was unparalleled intellectual ferment. It also resulted in further division in the *ummah* and new sects were born, especially Isma'ilis and Qaramia, also known as *batinis* i.e. those who believed in interpreting the *Quran* with hidden meaning which were real meanings and the *zahiri* apparent meanings were meant only for masses, not for initiated.

The Isma'ilis were further subdivided in several sects and sub-sects. The Qaramitas, a sub-sect of Ismailis, were on the other extreme and believed in suspending practicing *zahiri* shari'ah as those who followed hidden meaning of the *Quran* (also called *ta'wil*). The Qaramita's whole emphasis was on communistic living under a *da'i* command.

All the members of the sect contributed all their earnings to the *da'i* who ran a common kitchen. Private possession was allowed only in arms like swords and bows etc. The Qaramitas succeeded in establishing their state in Bahrain for thirty years.

Germany, has given detailed account of Qaramitas state in Bahrain and has refuted unfair charges against them like possessing common wives etc. It is interesting to note that some scholars maintain that Mansoor Hallaj who was put to death by Abbasids, also belonged to Qaramita movement and was put to death not really for his slogan of *anal haq* but for conspiring, along with Qaramita, to overthrow Abbasid regime.

Qaramita also became rivals of Fatimids in Egypt and Tahir Qarmati established his regime in Syria when he took away *Hajar al-Aswad* from Kaaba and kept it in his possession for thirty years and the Fatimids had to persuade him with great difficulty to release it. They (Fatimids) restored it to Kaaba and thus relieved the whole Islamic world of great anxiety.

Also, there was sharp polarization in the Sunni Islam as a reaction to new intellectual trends, due to transfer of philosophical treasures of the world to Baghdad, which then established itself as greatest intellectual and philosophical centre of the world. They used the weapon of philosophy and developed what came to be termed as *ilm al-kalam* i.e. dialectical knowledge.

They began to refute all claims of philosophers through *ilm al-kalam*. The famous debate between al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd is well-known. Al-Ghazali wrote his tract *Tahafut al-Falasifa* (Bewilderment of Philosophers) to which Ibn Rushd replied by counter-tract *Tahafut Tahafut al-Falasifa* (Bewilderment of Bewilderment of Philosophers). Ashari, another theologian, took extreme positions on all theological issues. Against philosophers who had limited following among the intellectual elite, theologians like Ash'ari found mass following and established themselves as great theological leaders.

Ghazali himself wrote the classic work *Ihya' al-Uloom* (Revivification of Knowledge to revive traditional theology). It became a classical asharite theological work in Islamic world and is referred to by all traditional scholars. Some scholars maintain that it was after al-Ghazali's work that all gates of *ijtihad* were closed in the Islamic world. But this seems to be oversimplified. There are very complex causes for this; fall of Baghdad, end of central Abbasid regime, Islamic state and development of weak regional states.

What is to be noted here is that this polarization could have been avoided to avoid division in Islamic world. The traditional theologians and ulema reacted too sharply to the intellectual and philosophical movement; some philosophers too, on the other hand, went to extremes. And Qaramita, as already discussed, even suspended shari'ah causing alarm among all.

A section of Isma'ilis who later established Fatimid regime first in Western Africa and later in Egypt exercised due caution in creating balance between what was *zahiri* and *batini* but their political rivalry with the Abbasids proved no less divisive on the theological front too. Unfair accusations were made against them by mainstream theologians. In fact it was Fatimids who persuaded Qaramitas to return *hajar al-Aswad* back to Kaaba.

There was another division too: the philosophers and intellectuals tried to grasp truth through intellectual efforts while the Sufis laid stress only on spiritual aspects and experiences. In this the Quranic middle path was lost. The *Quran* had evolved a unique approach which was very

comprehensive. It was approach based on all important components of life—spiritual, intellectual, moral and material.

It invited believers to live in this world, contribute to its material prosperity, reflect deeply on Allah's creation, enrich spiritual relations with its creator so as never to become arrogant of material achievements, to maintain high moral standards to keep order and balance in the world and to constantly learn lessons from the past. The Quranic language was a new contribution of all these aspects.

However, theological debates and efforts to understand the *Quran* in the light of pre-Islamic Arabic diction destroyed much of this uniqueness. What was worse, many commentators of the *Quran* not only depended on this pre-Islamic usage of Arabic words but also on myths and legends from Judaic and Christian sources which completely destroyed the Quranic spirit and the Quranic commentaries became a mythological labyrinth.

Commentators like Imam Fakhruddin Razi tried to use Aristotelian deductive logic to write on the *Quran*. All this went on causing sterile theological debates. The more such debates took place the more theology became complex and beyond the reach of common Muslims. For jurists, the *Quran* was more a source of legal wrangling and sterile debates on various issues like whether to raise hands or to do *masah* this way or that way and so on. *Fiqh*, instead of becoming a source of high morality became cause of division among Muslims on very petty and ridiculous issues.

Now we have reached a stage wherein sharp divisions have taken place among Muslims. As explained these divisions are political, theological and intellectual and it is very challenging to undo these differences. The present political climate in the Muslim world is further sharpening these differences. That is why *ummah* has become an empty slogan. What is worse every effort to create unity results in further division.

The Arab world itself stands divided along political interests; then there are Arab and non-Arab divisions. They are not united even on major political challenges like those from Israel and United States of America. This reality should not be lost sight of. To evolve common strategies, one

has to be realistic and should not be swayed by any kind of rhetoric.

Muslims tend to be emotional. The more the divisive forces work, the more insecure they feel and more insecure they feel more emotionally they react. Attacks on Islam have multiplied like never before and it makes Muslims react more emotionally than strategically and intellectually. It requires great maturity and political shrewdness to respond to these attacks. Our emotional reactions and street protests, and worse, terroristic and violent responses benefit only our enemy and the attacks on Islam further sharpen.

We may not be able to overcome our differences resulting in complete unity of *ummah* but certainly we can work out strategies to react un-emotionally and more intellectually, so as to project a peaceful and dignified image of Islam. It will greatly enhance respect for Islam and Muslims in the world.



Religion as I View it

I am now over 70 years of age. I have faced many challenges and have gone through much turmoil in life. However, on the whole I am quite satisfied with my life and my modest achievements. I initially, gave up my engagement with philosophy and theology in favour of engineering for better material prospects. But in hindsight I feel that it was not a correct decision that I had taken.

I decided to resign my job as a civil engineer in 1981, to re-engage with these subjects. I feel I would have hardly achieved any thing as a civil engineer, though perhaps, I would have had a better and more comfortable life in the material sense. But spiritually and creatively, I would have died a non-descript man.

My education was not in very reputed institutions but only in municipal or government schools and colleges. My father taught me Islamic theology based on the *Quran* and hadith and he had the knack of implanting it deeply in my intellect. It was as a result of this that I never lost my interest in these subjects throughout my life; not even as an engineer. However, as a result of orthodox Islamic education, I could not develop a critical mindset. I was taught not to question but to accept.

However, my father, despite his orthodoxy was a tolerant soul and I

learnt from him to tolerate other viewpoints. Developed further, it resulted in developing critical thinking. Later, by the time I graduated in engineering, I could appreciate one thing: real education results in rejection of what is and developing what should be. It is this tension between what is and what should be that leads to the creation of a new world.

A conforming mindset results in reinforcing the status quo which benefits the leaders of the established order. One who remains in this world finds it very easy to live with the establishment but those who wish to create a new world reject it. All prophets, *rishis* and *munis* and great thinkers always rejected the world they were born in and left a new world behind before they died.

For these prophets and great thinkers, one who is lost in this world is a *kafir* (one who hides the truth and lives with falsehood) and one who creates a new world is a *mumin* (believer in truth, in justice and human dignity). They lived and died for a new world. From Buddha to Christ to Muhammad they all rejected the given world and showed us the way to create a new world.

Buddha, Christ, Muhammad (PBUH) gave up their comforts of life and spent years reflecting on a new world. Instead of losing themselves in the comforts of their given world they preferred to engage with blue prints of a new world. Those who are lost in this world live for themselves and those who struggle to create a new world live for others. Kings and rulers who lived for themselves are part of history and their burial places are also not known. But prophets, *rishis* and *munis* continue to inspire us long after their death and their burial places and *samadhis* are visited by millions.

When I understood this secret of life I tried in my own humble and limited way to work for another possible world. It also changed my understanding of the word *kafir* and *mumin*. I had inherited certain fixed meanings but now a new meaning dawned which was more in conformity with the Quranic spirit. It is not that one who does not accept Islam is *kafir* and one who does, is always a *mumin*.

A real *kafir* is one who lives for himself and for comforts of his own life making serious compromises with fundamental values of life such as

truth, justice, compassion and human dignity. He inflicts suffering on others for his own comforts and lust for power. He lives in *this world*. A real *mumin* (believer) is not only one who formally accepts Islam but one whose life is a continuing struggle for truth and who refuses to compromise with falsehood, is an embodiment of compassion and is always engaged in relieving others' suffering.

To me the Prophet of Islam is what the *Quran* aptly describes as *Rahmatun lil 'Alamin* i.e. Mercy of the Universe. It is mercy and compassion which results from tenderness of heart, from living and feeling, which helps in relieving the entire humanity of all suffering. It is the hard-heartedness and lust for gain which inflicts suffering on others. However, later Muslim rulers, to fulfil their lust for power, changed the image of Islam and reduced it to some formal observations and beliefs while inflicting suffering on others. All the later theological debates (with certain honourable exceptions) and *fatwas* of *kufr* (unbelief) were the result of this reversal of Islamic spirit.

It has happened in the history of all religions that the founders' Herculean efforts to create a new world are reduced to naught by those who convert religion into an immutable formal theology to retain their control over power. The real spirit of religion (I am not using the word 'religion' here in its pro-establishment theological sense) is to keep on challenging coercive powers. And the Prophet (PBUH) rightly defined *jihad* as telling the truth on the face of a tyrant ruler.

Thus, from the above saying of the Prophet (PBUH) I conclude that real *jihad* can never be violent in form; much less using violence for achieving one's objectives. Jihad is nothing but constant struggle to challenge coercive and unjust powers for creating the other world where there will be no violence or even coercion. According to my own understanding of the *Quran*, jihad is nothing but ceaseless spiritual struggle for a just world and violence is permissible in exceptional circumstances to defend oneself. And for that too, it should be avoided as far as possible.

I believe any change brought about by violent or coercive means will never do away with injustice and can, at best, result in greater co-

ercive powers. Violence, in other words, continues to reproduce itself. I also believe that religion, instead of going along with political power, should remain its strong critic. Since power corrupts, power will corrupt religion also and we have seen this in history.

However, it is happening even in the twenty first century in many countries, including some advanced countries of the West. Politicians misuse religion and corrupt its teaching and practices most cynically to reap political benefit.

Initially it may appear that religion is a value-giver and a moral force and hence it would put politics on the right track. Every time it has proved to be an illusion and I believe religion should in no case be married with politics. Politics is all about power games and hence the best role for religion and religious leaders would be to maintain a distance from politics and act as strong critic of political establishment.

The doctrine, invented by some Muslim leaders, that religion cannot be separated from politics in Islam should be reinvented to say that religion, while maintaining its distance from politics, should, through criticism of political authorities, try and correct their course. Religion, by becoming part of any establishment, much less political establishment, loses its very moral spirit. Not only that, if it becomes its own establishment, religion gets corrupted. Religion, therefore, should not become an establishment at all. All religious establishments develop their own politics of control and hence suppress people, even eliminate its critics.

I believe that no religion is possible without freedom of conscience and fearlessness and commitment to truth. A religious person jealously guards this freedom. It is lack of this commitment to truth that results in religion becoming an obstacle rather than being helpful to human beings. Without this freedom, religion ends to become lifeless and ritualistic.

It is my conviction that religion should spur healthy change rather than become an obstacle. However, change should be for the benefit of the whole humanity and not for a section of it at the cost of others. Value-based traditions should not be compromised and change should be guided by general human welfare. Traditions should not be spurned

just because they are traditions and should not be worshipped because they are traditions. Traditions must change if they cease to play a healthy role for the humanity.

It is my opinion that religion should not divide but unite humanity. Human solidarity is the common denominator of all religions. The feeling of superiority over other religious traditions is human arrogance rather than true religious spirit. A true religious believer would never claim superiority over other religions. Since truth is the core of all religions (no religion would be acceptable without this core of truth) one truth cannot be superior over the other. However, their cultural expressions can differ and it is these cultural and linguistic differences which make one religion different from the other. Customs and traditions and parts of religious rituals are products of culture more than religion.

Cultural diversity should be celebrated and this diversity is the way of life for the entire humanity these days. The *Quran* refers to this diversity as creation of Allah and all Muslims should welcome it. If cultural diversity is accepted, it helps ease inter-religious tensions also as most of our religious practices are cultural in origin. Cultural and linguistic differences are more fundamental than religious.

Also, all religions have urged human beings to resist temptation, anger and feeling of revenge. Forgiveness is one of the highest qualities of religious life and in Islamic tradition Allah has been repeatedly described as *Ghafur al-Rahim* (i.e. Pardoner and Merciful). Thus a worshipper of God has to forgive and control his anger and feeling of revenge. These are truly religious qualities.

If one can suppress these negative feelings, there will not be much violence in the world. One commits violence because one is greedy and wants to take away what belongs to others or when one is angry and wants to take revenge and fails to forgive. Even world wars have taken place because of these negative attributes in an individual or group or nation. Our world would be a much better place to live in if these negative qualities could be suppressed.

Here I am reminded of a Sufi called Sarmad who was a contempo-

rary of Aurangzeb. His story is very inspiring and also illustrates what it means to be religious. He had supported Dara Shikoh, also inclined towards Sufism, and hence Aurangzeb wanted to kill him. He obtained *fatwa* from the 'ulema on the grounds that he did not recite *kalimah* (profession of Islamic faith) fully. He would only say *la ilaha* (there is no god) but did not say *illallah* (except one God).

On the basis of the *fatwa* Aurangzeb ordered his execution and when the executioner raised his sword, one of Sarmad's disciples rushed and whispered in his ear: 'now at least say *illallah* and save your life.' Sarmad replied 'do you want me to speak a lie to save my life?' The disciple, surprised at this reply said, 'is it a lie to say *illallah*? 'No', said Sarmad, 'it is the highest truth but for me it would be a lie?' 'Why', the disciple asked. 'Because', Sarmad said 'I have not been able to really deny so many gods of desire still sitting in my heart. How can I then say *illallah* (except One God)? I am still worshipping so many idols of desire and not free of them'. His head was cut off.

Unless we deny these idols of desire we cannot become truly religious. This was the message of Sarmad. Not only do we worship these idols of desire, we fail to suppress anger and feeling of revenge and purify our heart. Being religious is a constant effort, a continuing jihad against all evils we are controlled by. We are not free persons because we are shackled by these. A truly free person should be free of all this and his/her only passion should be truth and justice.

I also believe that passionate love of Creator and all human beings, irrespective of their religion, colour or ethnicity should be our motivating force. 'A heart without love', says Jalaluddin Rumi, 'is nothing but a handful of dust. A human devoid of love is not worthy of humanity'. Jalaluddin Rumi whose *mathnavi* (an epic poem in several volumes) is called the *Quran* in Persian, was a great scholar holding a high place in the court of the King of Quniya in modern day Turkey but was devoid of love.

It was a roaming *aervish* Shams Tabriz who introduced him to the importance of love so much so that he began to say: 'I am neither Muslim, nor Christian, nor Jew, nor from earth nor from heavens, nor

from east nor from West nor from north nor from south, but my only identity is love and love of my beloved'. It is this passionate love that made Maulana Rum write '*mathnavi*' which made people revere him. His *mathnavi* is read with great fervour even today.

Another great Sufi saint Muhiyuddin Ibn Arabi also makes love fundamental in his school of thought. He says in one of his poems that 'love is my religion and love is my Shari'ah. Love indeed sustains life on this earth'. This love is universal and in fact I believe one can love God only through love of His creations. Life will be barren without love. It is love which frees human beings of all negative passions i.e. anger, hatred, greed and revenge. It removes the feeling of 'otherness' of the other.

Love transcends all barriers; religious, linguistic, cultural as well as ethnic. Pure love can be only dwell in a pure heart. There should not be any expectation in love. It admits only of sacrifice for the sake of one's beloved. It also does not admit any sense of possession. The beloved cannot be possessed. Any sense of possession destroys the spirit of love as love is supposed to be selfless.

Religion often creates a sense of otherness for people of other religions whereas love creates feeling of oneness and thus love is a superior feeling. Love also implies respect for the beloved's integrity. For Sufis the real beloved is Allah and a Sufi considers death as *wisal* i.e. union with Allah. For a lover the greatest joy is union with his beloved and hence love takes away the fear of death from one's mind.

There are two categories of love '*ishq-e-haqiqi* (real love) and *ishq-e-majazi* (figurative or metaphorical love). Love of Allah is real love ('*ishq-e-haqiqi*) and love of human being is called '*ishq-e-majazi*. Sufis express their love of God through love of human persons. For them real love has to be expressed metaphorically. I, therefore, maintain that human life is incomplete without love. Also, richness of life can be appreciated only through love.

I also believe that real religion does not lie in rituals like prayer, fasting, pilgrimage and so on. These are means to an end and the end is inner perfection, ridding one's heart and soul of all evils. If rituals become an end in themselves, inner perfection cannot be achieved.

These rituals may be necessary but never sufficient for true religiosity. However, for many, religiosity consists more in performing these rituals than perfecting oneself.

I think rationalist attack on religion is not justified. They think reason is an end in itself. Reason is also a means, not an end. Human life is incomplete without emotions, particularly emotion of love. Reason, in a philosophical sense, enables us to understand this world and hence reason plays an important part in progress and development. But reason without faith is lame. A perfect human being stands on two legs – reason and faith. It is perfect faith accompanied by reason that makes human life properly balanced.

Once a human being arrives at certain conclusions with the help of reason, the role of reason ceases there and the role of faith begins. It is faith in one's goal which infuses spiritual energy to act. It is again faith which enables human beings to make supreme sacrifices to achieve their goal.

If I am convinced that human freedom and dignity are important goals, I must act to achieve these goals. Here, not reason but faith enables us to act and do whatever possible to achieve these goals. I admit faith in its extreme and devoid of reason, can be exploited by unscrupulous elements and blind faith becomes a powerful tool for exploitation of many gullible people. In this sense I am one with rationalists but I disagree with them that faith is always blind and only reason helps.

As blind faith is undesirable, scepticism, the extreme form of reason, is equally undesirable. Once the founder of scepticism fell into a ditch in his old age, while walking with his disciples, and cried for help. However, his disciples, true to his teaching began arguing whether it was worth saving the master's life. But one of his disciples said human life must be saved and he pulled out the master from the ditch, risking his own life.

According to the Islamic tradition, when Ibrahim (Abraham) was asked by Nimrod to jump into the fire as he was fighting against his tyranny and oppressive rule, Abraham jumped into it to save the oppressed whereas reason was only analyzing whether it was worth doing so. It is faith in values which allows human beings to sacrifice for others. Reason is important for progress and development but faith is essential

for deciding the direction of progress and development.

Today's progress and development is motivated by greed, profit and consumerism and is utterly directionless. It is achieved through the misery of millions and total destruction of our climate and ecological balance. Today's progress and development, made possible through technology, is utterly destructive of all values and finer and sensitive aspects of inner human life. It is also not possible without using violence against the weak. The developed countries are using violence in the African and Asian countries to sustain their unsustainable growth based on greed and consumerism. Without violence they cannot sustain this so called growth. Reason is quite neutral to this destruction and only faith in human values and human goals can show the way.

Humanity today, needs faith in these values and sensitization towards others suffering as never before. We are destroying our planet earth with utter impunity. Thus we need a world without violence and thousands of years ago insights of great religions like Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism and Bahaism showed us the way. However, even these religions became prey to human greed and there is a great need to revive their real spirit. We should also remember that all great prophets, seers and saints were from oppressed classes and were critics of powerful and arrogant rulers and liberators.

I believe that all religions are a source of rich values and a precious heritage and coupled with reason, a precious gift of God. We can transform our earth into a real paradise of peace. Therefore, what we need is real synthesis of faith and reason to achieve our goal. Faith, reason, love and non-violence are our real saviours. These should be the guiding stars of our life to humanize our progress and development.



Session – IV

Islam in India

Sirhindi's Children

Imam Rabbani Sheikh Ahmad al-Faruqi al-Sirhindi used to be a major figure — and quite a controversial one too — among the *ulema* during the Mughal period. He left a great impact on religious and political ideas of a section of Muslims not only during the Mughal period but also in subsequent periods, particularly during the 19th and 20th centuries. He had both followers and opponents among Muslims in India. It is, therefore, quite interesting to throw some light on his ideas. The Mughal emperor Akbar's policies led to the acceptance of religious pluralism and integration. Akbar happened to come under the influence of the two sons of Mulla Mubarak: Ab ul Fazl and Faizi. Both brothers were persecuted by the orthodox *ulema*; they ultimately found refuge in Akbar's court. Both belonged to the *wahdat al-wujud* school of Sufism. Wahdat al-Wujud (unity of being) is the most liberal of Sufi schools.

The school emphasises that there is only one being and we are all its manifestations. Thus all human beings are one in origin despite different religions, cultures and languages. The second major doctrine of this school is *sulh-i-kul* — total peace and peace with all, a doctrine that eliminates all conflicts and discrimination on all grounds. Akbar

was greatly influenced by both the doctrines and he had an inquisitive mind which wanted to know the basic tenets of all religions.

Thus, Akbar was convinced of the truth of all religions. He played a major role in bringing people of different faiths together. India has been a country of great diversities, religious, cultural, racial and linguistic. It never was mono-religious in its history. Any tendency to assert to the contrary gives rise to conflicts and separatism in India. The religions that originated in India — Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, etc — (besides several tribal practices) also accepted the diversity of views. The famous doctrine that 'truth is one but it is manifested in different ways' was a product of this diversity.

Akbar's greatness lay in the fact that he understood and accepted this Indian reality although he himself belonged to the Islamic faith. As a just ruler, he should have been neutral, but Akbar also accepted the truth of other religions. He never considered people of other religions kafirs, as many orthodox theologians would do. The *Quran*, in fact, does not call people of other religions 'kafirs'. On the contrary, it asserts that a true Muslim is one who shows equal respect to all prophets; it says further, "We have sent guides to all nations."

Thus, every nation (or tribe, country or *qaum*) has been blessed with a guide from Allah, and thus has been provided with truth from Allah. The *Quran* addresses only those Arabs of Mecca as kafirs who rejected the truth preached by Mohammed (PBUH) although they had no truth of their own or any revealed scripture. And the *Quran* preached doctrine of co-existence even with those kafirs who did not persecute Mohammed and his followers. It propounded the doctrine of 'for you is your religion and for me is mine'. However, for various reasons, this liberal and open approach of the *Quran* and the Prophet (PBUH) did not always find acceptance with Muslims who were narrow-minded; they denounced not only non-Muslims but also those Muslims as kafirs who did not agree with them on theological matters. These differences are still so sharp that every sect of Islam considers the other sect having gone astray and 'kafir'.

The Sufis, especially those belonging to the *Wahdat al-wujud*

school, did not agree with such exclusionary approach; they recognized the truth of other religions. Akbar subscribed to this approach under the influence of the sons of Mulla Mubarak. He actually went a step further and floated his own creed, *Din-i-Ilahi*. It is not for a ruler to start his own creed; it will always be perceived as politically motivated and not a matter of heart and soul or something spiritual.

It was not for nothing that all prophets in the *Quran* (with two exceptions) were from amongst poor shepherds or ordinary people having no political interest. A founder of religion cannot be seen as one with some vested interest. It is not surprising that even those closest to him did not accept Akbar's *Din-i-Ilahi*, and the faith did not survive after Akbar's death. However, this takes nothing away from Akbar's greatness, and his attempt to integrate the people of India and adopt an inclusive approach. However, as pointed out earlier, those with narrow theological approach to religion wanted to assert the 'superiority' of Islam. It must be pointed out here that religion should be treated primarily as a spiritual approach creating humility and spirit of truth, and should not be allowed to become an instrument of power.

The theologians, however, take religion as a source of power and matter of sole truth, which leads to arrogance. Sheikh Sirhindi and his followers belonged to this school of thought. They believed their version of Islam was the source of sole truth and all those who differed with them had gone astray. Sheikh Sirhindi considered it his mission to revive 'true' Islam. As he was born on the eve of the second millennium of the Islamic calendar, he was referred to as *Mujaddid alf-i-sani* — one who renewed the second millennium.

Khalid Umri from the school of Ahl-i-Hadith says that the *ulema* lost their influence in Akbar's court, and this encouraged Hindus to assert themselves. This, they say, paved a way for the founding of the creed of *Din-i-Ilahi*. Mulla Mubarak and his sons Abul Fazl and Faizi inculcated 'anti-Islamic' attitude in Akbar in order to serve their own interests and to seek closeness to Akbar, they theorise. Abul Fazl and Faizi made Akbar hostile to *ulema* to take revenge! The orthodox *ulema* saw these developments in Akbar's court as corruption (*fasad*),

and condemned it. Khalid Umri considered Din-i-Ilahi harmful, and wrote that this faith launched by Akbar had brought misery to the Mughal emperor's court, and the whole country was affected by it. The *ulema* prepared themselves to confront the situation, and revive their religion.

He quotes Qazi Aslam Saif: 'Prostration for respect (*sajda-i-tazeem*) before Akbar was made obligatory. Names like Mohammed and Ahmed were banned. Circumcision was not allowed. Cow slaughter was banned and pork was permitted so much so that breeding of dogs and swines were considered part of culture. The Shariah rules were ridiculed. Shi'ah beliefs and innovations were permitted. Temples were patronized and respected and mosques were locked. The *ulema* and mashaikh (elderly divine persons) were persecuted and harassed. The Sufis were treated with contempt and a campaign was launched against them.'

'The dangers of Akbar's Din-i-Ilahi were felt across the Islamic world, and some servants of Allah showed courage and declared their opposition to this neo-faith. They worked for the renewal of faith and tried to promote *tawhid* and *sunnah* with firmness and courage.'

One can see in these lines the highly exaggerated opposition to Akbar's liberal and integrative policies. The account given by Qazi Aslam Saif is far from true. No ruler can afford to lock the mosques and allow pork while banning cow slaughter or ban names like Mohammed and Ahmed. This only shows the depth of opposition to liberalism, inclusive and integrative policies. It was in such an atmosphere created by the *ulema* against Akbar that Sheikh Sirhindi launched his campaign against the Mughal emperor, on the one hand, and Sufis like Abul Fazl and Faizi, on the other. The Sheikh and his followers wanted to revive strict application of orthodoxy and that was what they meant when they referred to *Kitab wa Sunnah* (the *Quran* and the Prophet's sayings and doings). They forgot that there were different interpretations of the holy book and also there was no unanimity about Hadith.

What Sirhindi was opposed to was a liberal approach to religion, and hence he firmly opposed the doctrine of *Wahdat al-wujud* (unity

of being), which opens the doors to all religions and makes them acceptable and respectable. He came out with his own doctrine of *Wahdat as-shuhud* — unity of witnessing or appearance. *Wahdat as-shuhud* strengthened orthodoxy. Though Emperor Jehangir did not advocate Akbar's *Din-i-Ilahi*, he did adopt a liberal approach. However, unlike Akbar, his son had no love for Sufism or religion as such. He continued with the practice of *sajda-e-tazeem*. He once summoned Sheikh Sirhindi and expected him to perform *sajda'*. The Sheikh refused and greeted the emperor in the Islamic way — *as salam-o-alaykum* (peace be upon you).

This offended Jehangir and he imprisoned the sheikh in Gwalior fort where he spent more than two and a half years. The Sheikh had a following among a powerful group of courtiers; they pressurised Jehangir to release him and he was released honourably. The *Kitab* and *Sunnah* discourse had their own attraction. Many thought, as it often happens today too, that their problems arose from non-compliance with the *Quran* and *Hadith*. Since Sheikh Ahmad was opposed to the doctrine of *Wahdat al-wujud*, it resulted in separatist politics too. The ruler, according to him, should rule as per the *Quran* and *Sunnah*, ignoring Indian realities. It was negation of Akbar's inclusive policy. Rule, according to the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*, could be valid in Muslim majority countries, but not in countries like India where Muslims were a minority.

Jehangir and Shahjahan understood the Indian reality, which was complex. So they followed more or less a policy of integration rather than separation. Things changed under Aurangzeb. Aurangzeb was a shrewd ruler. He wanted to seize power from Dara Shikoh whom Shahjahan had appointed his heir apparent. Dara Shikoh, like Akbar, was under the influence of Sufi Islam. He had studied several Hindu scriptures in Sanskrit and also translated some *Upanishads* into Persian under the title of *Sirr-e-Akbar* (The Great Mystery). He wrote a book *Majma'ul Bahrayn* (Co-mingling of Two Oceans—Islam and Hinduism). He compared the teachings of the two religions and found a great deal of similarities in them.

Dara Shikoh had thus gone a step further than Akbar. Had he come to power, he would have followed policies to bring the people of India closer to each other irrespective of their different faiths. Aurangzeb was a disciple of a son of Sheikh Sirhindi and had imbibed Sheikh's outlook through his son. Also, Sirhindi, as pointed out before, had a lot of influence over several courtiers; he wanted to get their support for seizing power from Dara Shikoh. Following Sirhindi's policies suited Aurangzeb politically too. Aurangzeb, being politically shrewd, won over some important Rajput sardars, like Mirza Raja Jaisingh and ruler of Jodhpur, on his side. He made Mirza Raja Jaisingh his army chief. This way, on the one hand, he encouraged Islamic orthodoxy to win over the *ulema*, and those nobles who were under the influence of Sheikh Sirhindi and influential Rajput Sardars, on the other. But on the whole, Aurangzeb's rule resulted in separatism rather than integration. Later on, he also re-imposed *jizyah* (a tax) on non-Muslims, which alienated most Hindus.

None of Aurangzeb's sons proved to be strong enough to ensure stability of the empire and the Marathas, who had challenged Aurangzeb's rule under the leadership of Shivaji, began to attack Delhi, indulge in plunder and loot. Jats and Rohillas too attacked Delhi. This resulted in anarchy. It prompted Shah Waliyullah to invite Ahmadshah Abdali to come and teach the Marathas a lesson. Shah Waliyullah, it is important to note, was a man of vision. He tried to bring about reconciliation between the doctrines of *wahdat-ul-wujud* and *wahdat al-shuhud* to unite Muslims following two different schools of thought. However, despite the shah's sincerity, it did not work. Inviting Abdali was not a politically wise decision. Whatever was the Shah's intention, it did not work out that way as political power struggle has its own dynamics, and Abdali was, after all, a foreign invader. He came, looted, plundered, killed and went away.

Shah Waliyullah could do little to change the balance of political power. He was not like other theological thinkers who would confine themselves to theology, but was a keen observer of social scene and an analyst. He could analyze the causes of decline of the Mughal Empire, but it was not in his power to reverse the trend.

His followers were divided into two groups — prominent in this group was Deoband School and Jami'at al-*ulema*-i-Hind. They accepted composite nationalism. The Jami'at went on to oppose separatist politics, challenged the 'two nation' theory and stood behind Gandhiji's leadership. Maulana Qasim Ahmad Nanotvi issued a *fatwa* urging Muslims to join the Indian National Congress, collected similar *fatwas* from other *ulema* and got them published under the title, *Nusrat al Ahrar*. Right from the beginning the Deobandi *ulema* have been standing for composite nationalism. As opposed to this group of Muslims, there were those who came under direct or indirect influence of Sheikh Sirhindi and adopted separatist politics. Among them were both theologians and intellectuals. Here some qualifications are necessary. All those who rejected composite nationalism and opted for separate nationalism were not necessarily influenced by Sheikh Sirhindi. Jinnah, for example, had his own reasons to opt for separatism. He shifted his position from composite to separate nationalism. It was more for personal and political than ideological reasons. He probably might not have even heard of Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi.

Among theologians and secular intellectuals were those who came directly or indirectly under the influence of Sheikh Sirhindi, became separatists and rejected composite nationalism. Also, there were those who admired Sirhindi, but did not necessarily agree with separatist politics. Iqbal was among them. The *allama* was undoubtedly an admirer of Sirhindi, but his political position was much more complex.

He was and was not a separatist. He neither adopted a clear separatist stand nor did he denounce it. Iqbal had great attraction for power. He wanted to see Muslims of the Indian subcontinent empowered. Also, ideologically Iqbal was internationalist; he rejected nationalism as narrow and unacceptable. He considered Muslims an international community both politically and spiritually. He said in one of his poems that nationalism was the shroud of the *millat* (international Muslim community). Maulana Husain Ahmad Madani, on the other hand, considered Muslims a *millat* only in the spiritual sense, but accepted composite nationalism in the political sense. He separated the spiritual

from the political. Muslims of the Indian subcontinent greatly admire Iqbal's poetry as he wanted to see them duly empowered and criticised *mullahs* for whom the meaning of Islam was limited to 'saying *namaz* in mosques', nothing more.

It is interesting to note that there is a qualitative difference between Jinnah's separatism and that of Iqbal, with the latter wanting to see Muslims politically empowered. Jinnah was hardly ideologically committed to Islam or even interested in the religion. His was purely a political fight and partition came about on certain political questions, constitutional arrangements and sharing of power.

For Iqbal, on the contrary, it was a question of Islamic vision. According to Iqbal, Muslims would not accept Nehruvian atheistic socialism, but would like to have an autonomous region to experiment with Islamic socialism. Iqbal was against narrow secular nationalism and a critic of the Western concept of nationalism in his poetry.

He was also not, at the same time, a separatist like Maulana Maududi who rejected any concept of secular politics and modelled his concept of Islamic state on communism, a one-party system headed by a Caliph, the ruler, having all the powers like the Islamic party Maududi called *Hizbulah* — the party of Allah! He advised his followers in India not to participate in secular politics. Iqbal, on the other hand, was much more open and did not devise any closed political system although he talked of experimenting with Islamic socialism. Maulana Maududi's system is too conservative whereas Iqbal's is quite revolutionary. Iqbal was much more open to other faiths, and his vision was much broader and modern. Iqbal was in a category by himself. He was neither a separatist nor a nationalist. It would be seen that there are different categories of separatism among the builders of the Muslim political system. In most Muslim majority countries, one finds some authoritarian regime in place, more feudal than modern or Islamic. Throughout history it has been so.

There is no Islamic political system in any Muslim country including Pakistan. Partition happened on secular lines, and it was not before Zia-ul-Haq that Pakistan was declared 'an Islamic state', Zia himself was

not clear what it meant except that he enforced *hudud* laws. His rule never derived legitimacy from any Islamic source. He was, at best, a military dictator, a usurper. In the globalised world, separatism is losing its political significance. A large number of Muslims are migrating to non-Muslim countries. Today, a significant number of Muslims live as minority in such countries, and Islamic separatism has no meaning for them. It is composite nationalism which serves their purpose. Thus, those who opposed separatism in Indian subcontinent were more relevant and realistic. Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi has a very narrow circle of followers. Sheikh Ahmad's theology poses another major problem. Even if Islamic polity is to be based on the *Qur'an* and Sunnah, which interpretation should be acceptable?



Session – V

Islamic Personality

A Man of Knowledge and Vision

Islam brought about a great revolution in the field of knowledge in Arabia where literacy was almost unknown and people took pride in their ancestry rather in culture and civilization. According to Tabari, the great historian and commentator on the *Quran*, there were no more than 17 people in pre-Islamic Mecca who could read and write. No wonder than that pre-Islamic period came to be called period of *jahiliyya* — period of ignorance. It was in this background that the *Quran*'s emphasis on knowledge has to be seen. The very first verse begins with the word *iqra'* (read) and the word *'ilm* (knowledge) occurs more than 800 times in the *Quran* as against the word *jihad* which occurs no more than 41 times. the *Quran* called *'ilm* light and *jahiliyya* darkness.

One can say there were three principle sources of knowledge in Arabia of that time the *Quran*, the Prophet (PBUH) and Ali. The *Quran* was of course the principal source which came through *wahi* (revelation) to the Prophet. The prophet's contribution was through hadith (what he said on various subjects) and sunnah — what he did and people observed and reported. Ali's contribution has reached us through his speeches, as he was man of great oration, and these were later collected under the title *Nahj al-Balaghah* — (Highway of Oration) and some letters

he wrote to his governors. The famous hadith of the Holy Prophet is accepted unanimously "I am city of knowledge and Ali is its door" and one enters the city through the door. Such was the importance of Ali in the matter of knowledge. Ali contributed very richly to intellectual advancement of Muslims.

The *Quran* is source of revelatory knowledge — from Allah and the Prophet's knowledge was innate rather than acquired. Ali's knowledge was what the Prophet passed on to him and hence called '*ilm ladunni*' as well as what was born of his vision of the society. Prophet was *insane-e-kamil* — perfect human being and Ali next to him in perfection. Hence for sufis Mohammed and Ali were two sources of inspiration. The Prophet (PBUH) lived in this world and yet was never attached to it. Ali, who always tried to closely follow the Prophet, never felt attracted towards the allurements of the world. He is even reported to have said "I divorce the world thrice — never to be attracted by it".

Ali, like the Prophet, was basically a deeply spiritual person and yet, like the Prophet, was conscious of the fact that millions of people live in this world and this world should be such, as to provide meaning and guidance to human life and to minimize human suffering. Renunciation of the world is no solution. This is possible only if one fulfills bodily needs but does not become a slave of ones body.

There was a power struggle in early Islam but Ali kept away from it until power was thrust upon him after the assassination of the third Caliph Hazrat Usman. Ali, while avoiding temptation of power was also conscious of the fact that one needs power, not to control others but to enforce certain rule of law, morality and justice. The *Quran* provided best guidance and yet all those who embraced Islam did not become perfect Muslims. They had all sorts of worldly temptations and many of them even embraced Islam for worldly gains.

Ali's priority, therefore, was to mould Muslims into real mu'min (— believers) and make them good Muslims and this world, a just place to live in, in keeping with the the Quranic teachings. The *Quran* tried to strike a balance between spiritual and bodily needs, between materialism and spiritualism, the Prophet being its perfect blend. Ali's exhortations

in *Nahj al-Balaghah* are a rich source of this approach. Since Ali never sought power to control others and exercise his authority, when it was thrust upon him he used it to enforce rule of law and justice as rigorously as he could. In this process, even his closest allies were alienated from him but he did not care. Abdullah bin Abbas was his closest ally and yet he wrote a stern letter to him when he took money from state treasury as a governor of Basra, which was more than his share. He left Basra unhappy.

Ali's letter to another faithful ally Malik bin Ashter, governor of Basraq is considered as masterpiece of principles of governance. He advised Malik 'do not say, 'I am your overlord and dictator, and that you should, therefore, bow to my commands", as that will corrupt your heart. He further writes to him, "Let your mind respect through your actions the rights of God and the rights of human beings...for otherwise you will be doing injustice to yourself and injustice to humanity."

He also advises Malik Ashter to 'Care for them with tenderness with which you care for your children, and do not talk before them of any good you might have done to them, nor disregard any expression of affection which they show in return...'

A Chief Justice should be selected, he writes, from the best of people. One who cannot be intimidated, who does not err too often, who does not turn back from the right path, and who is not self-centred or avaricious.

Thus, it would be seen that Ali's concept of power was for the people, never over people but unfortunately world was not perfect enough to accept this concept and he paid the price for it with his life. He became a martyr for the cause on the 21st of the month of Ramadan.



Session – VI

Islam and Politics

The Hope that is Obama

Obama chose Al-Azhar University, Cairo, to address the Muslim world. The choice of the venue was very meaningful. Firstly, as he said, he was invited by that institution to deliver his address. Secondly, his acceptance to speak to Muslims of the world from Al-Azhar was quite significant. Al-Azhar is the oldest Islamic institution of greatest significance as far as Islamic learning goes. To address Muslims of the world from there has its own importance.

No one can doubt that he spoke from his heart. Every word he uttered had conviction behind it. It was no mere rhetoric or a politically weighed speech. It reflected his vision and approach. One can say it was a major paradigm shift after a long time. America, being a nation of immigrants has always created a powerful enemy to maintain its own unity. Sometimes it was Japan, then Communist Russia and after collapse of communism it was the Islamic world.

George Bush raised the pitch of hostility with the Islamic world and resorted to war-mongering. He sought legitimizing of his policies through books like Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*. Much required change was needed to salvage America's image which took so much beating throughout the world. Barak Husain Obama came on the scene

as America's saviour. He brought about a paradigm shift.

Reaction to Obama's historic address can be divided into three categories: 1) outright appreciation and applause; 2) critical evaluation of what he spoke and guarded optimism about his pronouncements; and 3) outright rejection by some skeptics. Some of these skeptics even described him as a 'Christian Zionist'.

The most crucial part of his speech was about his solution to Palestinian problem. He obviously tried to maintain a balance between Israeli and Palestinian positions which, otherwise, are totally opposite to each other. It would be too much to expect that Obama extend outright support to Palestinian cause as many of us would like him to do. It is just not possible for any American president to do so.

Let us not forget, he has inherited a long American tradition of pro-Israeli American policy; what he chose to describe as strong ties between America and Israel. He put it authentically "America's strong bonds with Israel are well known." But he also departed from another well known American position on Israel. He, for the first time, accepted Palestinians' woes publicly. He said, "On the other hand... Palestinian people-Muslims and Christians – have suffered in pursuit of a homeland. For more than sixty years they have endured the pain of dislocation. Many wait in refugee camps on the West Bank, Gaza, and neighboring lands for a life of peace and security that they have never been able to lead."

We all know the plight of Palestinians and it was no revelation. But this, to be admitted publicly by an American President, is very significant. Israel was naturally disturbed and initially the Israeli Prime Minister Mr Netanyahu rejected Obama's remarks. But what Obama spoke the whole world listened and weighed his words and Netanyahu had to make a conciliatory statement.

Now many critics are saying the real test lies in what Obama does to translate his words into action. Quite true, but let us not forget words have their own importance. Obama appears to be quite sincere but for even a sincere person it is not always in his/her hands to translate words wholly into action. There are powerful obstacles to be overcome and powerful interests to be faced.

Obama too, like other American presidents, is surrounded by the highly influential Zionist lobby. Zionists also control American media which moulds public opinion and in a open democracy like USA, public opinion counts much. However, it does not mean that Obama will have a convenient excuse to do nothing. The world and especially the Muslim world will watch out for all his actions.

One thing seems to be quite likely. Israel will not be able to get away with its naked aggression as it did again and again in South Lebanon and in Gaza. It will not get uncritical support of Obama Administration as it got from the Bush administration. Even that will be a great change. Recently I had met in Germany a Norwegian lady peace activist in Palestine who told me 'after Israeli aggression in Gaza, I think peace has no chance in Palestine.' I had told her 'let us not give up hope.'

I think Obama has given us hope and hope gives us confidence. Obama may not be able to finally solve Palestine's problem but his speech has brought good tidings.

